

# “Full and Running Over”

- Acts 6&7 -

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*1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not*

*desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous 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 change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. 1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen....*

*54...When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

In the 1939-40 “winter war” between the Soviet Union and Finland, the second son of eight children from an inconsequential farming family...in a mere 100 days, killed over 500 soviet soldiers to become the undisputed most prolific sniper in history. With a Finnish made rifle with simple standard metal sights, **Simo Häyhä** in white camo would wait under the snow at sometimes -40 degrees for hours to get his man. The only thing that trumps this man and his story is the ordinary and non-descript world that he came from. **Simo Häyhä** was a nobody from a nowhere corner of the world. History is replete with such individuals. No great training or schooling. No financial abundance or backing. No innate fame. No fortune. No famous lineage or DNA. Just people who inexplicably went on to change the world. To excel and indelibly burn their name into the pages of history.

Ananias and Sapphira had indelibly stamped their names upon the passages of church history, under the heading of “How to do it wrong.” Lost to their own lusts and passions, they died for nothing more than an eternal object lesson. But now in chapters 7 and 8 of Acts would come the echo of those lives, in the living testimony of one man by the name of Stephen. We know little if anything about him. But Acts 6:5 introduces this faithful man of God as “a man **full** of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” Verse 8 says He was a man “**full** of faith and power.” The in chapter 7 verse 55 he is said once again to be a man “**full** of the Holy Spirit.” Stephen was a man that was full and overflowing.

Throughout history there have always been those faithful believers whose love *for* and commitment *to* the Lord seemed to shine through so greatly that others around them can’t help notice, and Stephen was just such a man. Nothing is known about the personal



life of Stephen—his parents, his siblings, or whether he had a wife or children; however, what is known about him is what is truly important. He was a faithful servant of God that was so full of the Holy Spirit, that he changed the world.

Acts chapter 6 begins with some detail concerning the birth of a new area of ministry within the church: *the ministry of the deacon*. It was a ministry formed out of necessity, maybe you could even say out of crisis. Sometimes, those decisions are the best moves we make, because God gets His way without a fight. Satan has always moved against believers on so many levels. We so often will barricade the “front door” while Satan is creeping in the back. We therefore find ourselves fighting a war with multiple “battle fronts.” Satan had begun to attack the church not just from the outside, but on this occasion...*and on many such occasions since that day*, the attacks were now coming even from within. Historically, it has always been one of Satan’s greatest weapons and frankly his success’s to cause divisions and strife from inside the body of believers.

The “Hellenists” spoken of in our text were Greek Jews. They were indeed Jews, but they were raised, lived, and spoke Greek. The Hellenists had come to find themselves in a position much like the modern church today, side by side with people who were often very different than they were. They were now family with the *Palestinian* Jews. These Jews spoke Aramaic and used the Hebrew Old Testament as their scripture. Now there were obviously issues to consider! They were brothers and sisters in Christ, but there would be some natural animosity that would tend to surface if they were tested. Certainly the greater church today...and no doubt *our* specific church, experiences these same issues and pressures. It is easy to feel that the college ministry gets more attention, or the children are the focus, etc. When the reality is that it takes **all** the parts of the body to be whole.

In the Jewish culture of that day, women did not hold a high status, or even an equal one. They did not receive inheritance, and thus were completely dependent upon their husbands or some other relative. The church stepped forward to care for those that were widows and had no family to care for them. A blessed motive, but one that quickly ran into some practical issues. In this, the apostles moved to do what was necessary. They knew that they could not humanly fill all the needs of the church! They would need full participation of the whole body in order to make the church operate as it should.

This was not an issue of status or who was most important. It was a logistical issue; one that was born out of necessity. As any church grows, decisions must be made in order to meet the needs of the body, and achieve the goals and visions of that particular fellowship. Anytime we attend a church for what *we* can receive instead of what we can supply, we relegate the body to the status of a grocery store. We become consumers. Customers rather than co-workers. That’s when we start using the term “church shopping.”

The apostles *...on the other end of the spectrum*, clearly understood what they were called upon to do by God. They knew what their place in the body was, and what they were supposed to be doing first. They understood what their priorities were! The apostles were blessed to be shepherds over a flock that not only understood these decisions, but supported them; not only in theory, but also in action.

The language of the word “serve” in the original is where we find our word “DEACON.” Several men were chosen to fill this servant role. It was a role that was no less important than any other to the success of the body, and no less crucial to the spread of the gospel! Please note that these were not *elected* individuals. They were chosen by God first, and then recognized and confirmed by man. What was the criteria for these appointments? They were men of good reputation and integrity, Spirit filled, and faithful. (note 1 Tim 3:8-13)

This passage in Acts, as well as further qualifiers in 1 Timothy, tell us that such men are not to be chosen for such positions without first being tested. This leads the church today to wisely practice the same prerequisites for all positions within the church. The “receivers” of the blessings from the hands of these men rightfully expected them to faithfully attend to their duties. Thus, those who oversaw their service were cautious in their choosing, as we need to be today! If these criteria are held, then it is easy to choose! One only needs to add some “patient time” to the situation in order to recognize just who God has chosen. These traits are not manifested for any real amount of time unless they are a reality in the individual.

After they had prayed, the apostles “laid hands on them.” Not to be filled with the Spirit—for the text tells us that they already were—and not to pass on any real or imaginary “power,” or any apostolic succession. To lay hands on an individual in the days of the New Testament was an act of “confirmation of ministry.” It was a sign of agreement with the call of God upon a person. They prayed first, seeking verification from God that what they were seeing was a true reflection of the heart and commitment of the individual.

Following this confirmation, Stephen took yet another step forward...this time “out of the pack.” By doing so, God would use him to manifest His glory, by showing “great signs and wonders” through him. It would be ministry beyond the waiting on tables, which was his “called area of service.” God used the open door of hands-on-service to practice some powerful spiritual healing.

However, the ministry path that Stephen would pursue would not be “successful” using the gauge of human and worldly success. For any individual that is faithful to answer his or her calling from the Father steps into that boat and embraces the storms that will come. The only way to avoid such trials is to avoid our calling. That will not be a hard road to find for it is a well beaten 4-lane.

Stephen, filled with the Spirit of God and full of His power, was wise beyond his own natural ability. He took them all on, dueling philosophies and debating doctrinal issues. Such was not for his own glory or to feed his own pride, but rather it was a righteous calling, proven by the success of his debate. God gave him the words which were proven by their result.

However, such victories rarely bring about sustained change in those we take down. Those who had been intellectually beaten this time too were not giving up so easily. No, pride is not an easily defeated foe! I have found that rarely can a man or woman be counseled out of their pride. Rather it seems that pride has to be broken. These religious leaders would now execute “plan B”; **They would lie**. This desperate move is often used by an enemy that is backed into a corner with no place left to go.

It can seem so unfair that these events would come to pass for an innocent individual who was doing nothing more than telling the truth and loving mankind. Stephen did not respond in anger, nor did he really even try to defend himself at all. He moved in a firm, yet loving way to point out the fundamental error in their understanding of God. But there are always plenty of people around that will sell their soul to the highest bidder!

*“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” 1 Cor 13 :4-7*

Now Stephen, for nearly all of chapter 7, would walk these men down the road of Jewish history. In doing so he would paint a clear and mighty picture of a coming Messiah and the fact that Jesus was the embodiment of prophecy and scripture! He would detail the historical evidence that God had everything under control, even when things seemed to them to be in chaos. God had for a millennia used whoever and whatever He wanted to ultimately manifest His glory, even if that meant using idol-worshipping nations to spank the Jewish nation. His plan would not be deterred!

After Stephen had detailed all these factual aspects of their history, none of which could be disputed, he would eventually cut to the chase! Coming out with “both guns blazing,” he lays down a blanket of scathing rebuke. The “gloves were off!” Stephen rolls on with the painful truth of where they stood with God. He tells them they were merely repeating history in their rejection of Jesus Christ. They had learned nothing from their own failed history, and even now refused to accept the true God who was manifested in the person of the Holy Spirit. Still outwardly religious, and yet inwardly rebellious, they seemed doomed to the rejection of the salvation of God!

Of course, they planted their feet in defiant rejection but Stephen was unmoved. Despite anything they would do, God was still there and still in control. Even the violent reaction of these men would have no effect on what God planned to do that day! Throughout history God has allowed what might be seen as earthly travesty. Yet His plans moved forward, unhindered by man’s lack of cooperation!

It appeared that Stephen had failed. But as always when a man is so filled and led by the Holy Spirit of God, this scene too held a secret. For standing quietly on the sidelines that day...was an unassuming young man for whom Stephen’s words would find their mark. As this man held the coats of those rebellious leaders as they stoned Stephen to death, God would inexplicably reach out...amongst all the millions of voices trying to get through, and would pluck this one individual out of masses and in doing so would move the world. Saul...**Paul the apostle**, would eventually go on to storm the walls of history, even regurgitating the very words and principles that Stephen had spoken this day.

Stephen had unwittingly passed the baton of ministry onto Paul, just as God had planned. Those men thought they had killed the Word of God, but had instead unwittingly unleashed upon the world the greatest evangelist in history. Paul the apostle would now enter the game, and by the time he would “leave the field” many years from that day, the world would be “turned upside down.” (Acts 17:6) Stephen departed this life with his mission accomplished. He had “finished well.” With the Lord on His lips, he went home to receive his graduation diploma, **eternal life**! A crown of victory! All having come out of a simple “nobody man” and “nothing background.” But a life lived out “full”. Full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith, and full of power. A life full and overflowing. The full life that Christ wants for each of us today.