

Place: Lurgan Baptist 20:2:2007

Reading: Acts 6:1-15

## THE CHURCH ABLAZE

### 14. THE FRAGRANCE OF A FULL LIFE

The ministry of the Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne still radiates the warmth of his holy love for Christ. This man of God was destined to become one of God's greatest gifts to His church for generations, and to be known long after his death as the “*saintly McCheyne*.” The pastor of St. Peter's church Dundee, it was said of him, “*his life was of the loveliest specimens of the Spirit's workmanship*.” His life was a clear example of the biblical text, his prayers were reverential and endearing and his preaching was so full of Christ, that it was evident to all that Christ was uppermost in his mind, and the deepest passion of his heart. The life of McCheyne was a full life, but a very short one. Born in 1813 he went to be with Christ in 1843. Now from the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost to the martyrdom of Stephen was barely six years. Stephen a Hellenist Christian, elected with Philip and five other men was a man of God, with a full but a short life. He was proof that the impact of a man's life and ministry has nothing necessarily to do with length.

Now this passage marks a transition in the book of Acts. Up to this point, Peter has been the dominating figure, fulfilling his calling by taking the gospel to the circumcised. ( Gal 2:7 ) Another figure of major importance looms on the horizon, the apostle Paul who is introduced at the end of ( Ch 7 ) Following Paul's conversion recorded in ( Ch 9 ) Peter begins to fade from the scene. ( Ch's 10 & 11 ) record his ministry to Cornelius, and ( Ch 12 ) his second miraculous release from prison. But from ( Ch 13 ) to the end of the book, the record focuses on Paul. Peter's only appearance in that section is at the Jerusalem council. Now bridging the gap between those two giants is Stephen. You see Peter ministered primarily to the Jewish people, and Paul primarily to the Gentiles. But Stephen's brief ministry was mainly to the Jews from Gentile lands.

Peter ministered in Jerusalem, Paul throughout the Roman Empire. Stephen's ministry was the catalyst that catapulted the church out of Jerusalem into the rest of the world. ( 8:1 ) Now Stephen was in many ways a forerunner to Paul. He boldly confronted the synagogues of foreign Jews in Jerusalem, possibly even entering them to debate with their members. ( 6:9 ) When he entered a new city to minister, Paul would habitually go first to a synagogue ( 17:2 ) Like Paul, Stephen encountered fierce opposition, even to the point of physical persecution. ( 7:54-60 2 Cor 11:23-25 ) Truly, the mantle of Stephen fell on his Hellenistic countryman Saul of Tarsus. It is even possible that Paul's first exposure to the gospel came through Stephen. ( 7:58 8:1 )

So Stephen was a key figure in the early history of the church. And his ministry though brief, was essential to God's plan for world evangelism. ( 8:1 ) That the world failed to recognise Stephen's greatness comes as no surprise. My ... the world measures success by popularity, prestige, or material wealth and thus fails to understand true greatness. After all, they killed the Saviour, beheaded Paul, executed Peter, and persecuted the church. Although the people judged Stephen a blasphemer and killed him, he was one of the noblest and most powerful men who ever lived.

The name “ *Stephen*,” comes from the Greek word *stephanos*, which means “ *a crown*.” In the Greek culture, it was “ *the wreath, garland, or chaplet given as a prize for victory, as a festal garment, or as a public honour for distinguished service or personal worth*.” Such a name was fitting for Stephen, who distinguished himself as a man of high spiritual acclaim and later would wear the honoured crown of a martyr. Now the whole story of Stephen is told in two chapters of the book of Acts ( Ch 6 & 7 ) And yet, swift as was his movement across the stage of action, he has nonetheless left behind trailing clouds of glory. Now I want to call your attention to five interesting and illuminating expressions that appear here with reference to this man Stephen. The first two are found in ( 6:3 ) “ *full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom*,” the third one is found in ( 6:5 ) “ *full of faith*,” and the last two are found in ( 6:8 ) where another translation puts it like this, “ *full of grace and power*.”

So it is to Stephen that Luke attributes this five fold fullness, *full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom, full of faith, full of grace, and full of power*. Now that is a man “ *full*,” for you ! Thus we have entitled our study, “ *The Fragrance of a Full Life*.” There are three aspects of Stephen's life that deserve our attention. Notice,

### (1) THE SERVICE HE RENDERED

Stephen emerges on the public scene at a critical time in the history of the church. Multiplication led to murmuring. There were some in the church who felt neglected and indeed may have been neglected. The problem was resolved when the twelve said, “ *But we will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word*.” ( 6:3 ) The apostles were saying, “ *We're getting behind in our study of the Word, in our prayer life, we've been so busy doing good things that we have neglected the best thing*.” The result was, the appointment of a seven man body to administer the financial and material affairs of the church. Stephen's initial task was to “ *wait on tables*.” ( 6:2 ) Thus the service he rendered,

#### (a) WAS PRACTICAL:

“ *Brother Stephen there is discord in the fellowship and we are so busy preparing to preach, we would like you to be part of a group of men who will be responsible for the practical affairs of the church. Now we will have peace in our study of the Word of God*.” Stephen smiled and approached his new task with the

realisation that he was doing this for his Lord. Now many believers would have been less than willing had they possessed Stephen's gifts. I mean he was an excellent preacher, probably more capable than some of the apostles and his conceptions of thought and argument were so outstanding that God recorded one of his sermons and gave it a place of honour. ( Ch 7 ) Stephen was a wonderful expositor of the Word of God yet he graciously concurred with the apostle's request to  
“ *serve tables.*”

Are you available for whatever God wants ? Have you placed yourself utterly at His disposal ? My .... the task the Lord may give to you, may not be prominent one, but like Stephen are you willing to serve ? Are you willing to do a backroom job and serve tables ? You see the Lord took Stephen, and Stephen showed he was so like the Lord Jesus in that he was willing to minister in the small and mundane things. (a)

### ***(b) WAS POWERFUL:***

Look at ( 6:8 ) There was,

#### **1. The WONDERS he PERFORMED:**

God was marking Stephen as one of His special messengers, even though he was not an apostle. ( Acts 2:22 ) In the New Testament church only the apostles, Stephen, Philip, ( 8:6-7 ) and Barnabas ( 15:12 ) performed miracles. Stephen's deeds of power show his close link with the apostles. But there was

also,

#### **2. The WORD he PREACHED:**

For the whole of his defence in ( Ch 7 ) is an exposition of Holy Scripture. Here is a message given by a man whose mind was saturated with a knowledge of the only Bible that was then available namely the Old Testament. My .... Stephen knew his Bible. He knew ***Bible Characters***, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses. He knew ***Bible History*** .... the unfolding of Gods purpose through the patriarchs, through Moses, through Israel. Stephen knew the Bible Theme, for he presented the Christ of the Scriptures ( 7:52 ) which leads me to say if you want to have spiritual power you will need to get to know the Word of God. My .... is your service powerful and effective ? Does it flow from your knowledge of Gods Word ? (a) (b)

### ***(c) WAS PROVOCATIVE:***

You see a man with the character of Stephen is a match for any attack, and a fierce one came. Alarmed by the power and effectiveness of Stephen's ministry, we read ( 6:9 ) “ *Then there arose ....*” Now Bible scholars are divided as to how many synagogues are in view here. According to ( 6:9 ) there may have been as many as five. Now synagogues were meeting places where the Jewish community assembled to read the Scriptures and worship. They originated as far back as the Babylonian Captivity, when the exiles were cut off from access to the Temple. According to the Talmud, there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at this time,

and many of these consisted of Hellenistic Jews, Jews, who had come from outside of Palestine. The “*Libertines,*” or “*Freedmen,*” were the descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey in 63 BC and taken to Rome. They were later granted their freedom and settled in Jerusalem.

Cyrenians and Alexandrians were from two of the major cities of North Africa. ( Lk 23:26 ) Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. Do you recall that Pauls hometown of Tarsus was located in Cilicia ? ( 21:39 22:3 ) And he likely attended their synagogue in Jerusalem. That Paul was present for the events surrounding Stephen’s trial and execution is evident from ( 7:58 and 8:1 ) My .... it’s possible that as a student of the great Gamaliel, he even participated in the debate with Stephen. Now what happened here was this. Men from all these synagogues came together and argued with Stephen.

### 1. There was ARGUMENTATION:

The word “*disputing,*” ( 6:9 ) does not refer to a quarrel but to a formal debate. No doubt this debate centred on the death, resurrection, and Messiah-ship of Christ and the inability of the Mosaic law and Temple ritual to save. Whatever the precise issues of the debate were, Stephen won. For “*they were not .... spake.*” ( 6:10 ) Human reasoning was no match for God given wisdom. So next,

### 2. There was ACCUSATION:

The Amplified puts it like this, “ They secretly instigated and instructed men to say, We have heard this man speak, using slanderous and abusive and blasphemous language against Moses and God.” ( 6:11 ) My .... it’s the same tactics all over again that were used at the trial of Christ ? ( Matt 26:59-61 ) They recruited false witnesses to accuse Stephen of things he had never done. Stephen was as good as dead. *Argumentation* had led to *Accusation* and then,

### 3. There was AGITATION:

Now previously the religious leaders had dared not man-handle the Christians for fear of the crowds. ( 5:26 ) But now because of the rumours no one protested when they “*came upon Stephen, and caught him, and brought him to the council.*” ( 6:12 ) Shouting and gloating, the officials shove innocent Stephen before the revenge-hungry Sanhedrin, who had been waiting for this very moment. All they need to convict him is a trumped-up case and the Jews from the synagogue provide their case. ( 6:13-14 ) *Argumentation: Accusation: Agitation:* and then

### 4. There was MISREPRESENTATION:

Now in his message Stephen had apparently quoted Christ who had said, “*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*” ( Jn 2:19 ) Of course, Christ was speaking of the temple of his body. ( Jn 2:21 ) He was prophesying His own death and resurrection, the very basis of the gospel message. But they distorted

His meaning and twisted what He said. My ... if anyone could understand Stephen's feelings during this ordeal, it was Christ. He too was accused of the same crime by false witnesses. He also raised the anger of the Sanhedrin. Christ knew what it was to suffer unjustly. Christ understood Stephen's feelings and my ... He understands your feelings as well. Tell me, have people been tearing you apart with their words ? The Saviour knows ! Has exaggerations turned friends against you ?

The Saviour knows ! Have you been locked out by others ? The Saviour knows ! Have your words been misrepresented ? The Saviour knows ! “ *Jesus knows all about our struggles ....*,” ( Heb 4:14-16 ) (1)

## **(2) THE SAVIOUR HE REVEALED**

Stephen was so like his Lord. Indeed someone has said that Stephen had a,

***Face that shone with the Look of Heaven:*** (6:15 )

***Eyes that gazed on the Light of Heaven:*** ( 7:55 )

***Lips that spoke of the Life of Heaven:*** ( 7:56 )

***Knees that bowed to the Lord of Heaven:*** ( 7:59-60 )

You see, Stephen revealed the Lord Jesus,

### ***(a) IN HIS LIVING:***

Another translation of ( 6:8 ) goes like this, “ *And Stephen full of grace and power.*” He like the Lord

Jesus, was full of grace. Now in the NT “ *grace,*” refers to the unmerited, undeserved favour of God poured upon us through Christ. But there is more. Professor Vincent Taylor reminds us that “ *if we had been living in pre-Christian days we should have used the Greek word ( *charis* ) quite differently from Pauls usage when he speaks of “ the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* We would have used the word to describe the charm of a lady, the grace of a speech, the favour of a king but not as Paul used it to describe the unmerited favour of God. This word “ *grace,*” then has a background of beauty. It suggests symmetry, rhythm, elegance, loveliness. And when you relate this to Stephen's life, you discover that here was a man who revealed the Saviour in his living. Thus we read in ( 6:15 ) Stephen's face was shining. It was not Hate that they saw there. It was not Horror that they saw there. It was Heaven they saw there. The radiant beauty of His Master beamed from his eyes, glowed in his countenance, suffused his whole personality. The radiance of Christ challenged his foes and charmed his friends.

John Wesley humorously said, “ One of the advantages of the grace of God is that it makes a man a gentleman without the aid of a dancing master.” Oh, to be like Stephen, “ *full of grace.*” Perhaps we should all ask ourselves, has anyone been around lately saying, “ *I want what you have.*” My .... has the shortage of grace made us repel people, or has the overflow of grace allured them to the Saviour from whom it comes ? Perhaps you have heard the story of the Salvation Army lassie and the sour-visaged man whom she took

for a prospective convert, when he was in fact one of the office-bearers in one of the churches. An open-air meeting was in progress, and the grim-looking gentleman stood at the rim of the listening crowd. The eager girl asked, “ *Are you saved ?* ” The words he bit off were, “ *I hope I am.* ” Then the girl with less tact than zeal, called out to the leader of the meeting, “ *He says that he hopes he is saved, but what a face for a child of God.* ” My .... can you imagine her ever saying that about Stephen ? No. But would she say it about you ?

### **(b) IN HIS DYING:**

You wonder what kind of world we live in when good and godly men like Stephen can be murdered by “ *religious bigots.* ” But we have similar problems in our so called “ *enlightened age.* ” Taking hostages, bombings that kill and maim, assassinations and all in the name of politics and religion. My .... the heart of man has not changed nor can it change apart from the grace of God. What a terrible death Stephen had yet even in death he revealed the Saviour. Look if you will at ( 7:54:60 ) and notice in his death Stephen acknowledged,

#### (1) The ADEQUACY of the Lord Jesus:

Do you feel that you could not face death ? Of course you can't for you don' have to die just now. What you need at this moment is grace to live and when the moment comes for you to die grace will be given. Do you know what its called ? **Dying grace !** And

Stephen was full of it. This man who previously reacted gracefully under provocation ( 6:9-15 ) now reacts gracefully as they life the stones to stone him. You see Stephen was so like Christ in his death. How ? Well, in death the Lord Jesus called, “ *My God, My God.* ”

( Matt 27:46 ) Do you see what Stephen said ? “ *Lord Jesus ....lay not this sin to their charge.* ” ( 7:59 ) In His death the Saviour committed His spirit to God, so did Stephen. ( 7:59 ) In His death the Lord Jesus prayed for His enemies ( Lk 23:34 ) so did Stephen. “ *Lord lay not .... charge.* ” ( 7:60 ) When George Wishart was about to be executed the executioner hesitated. Wishart came to him and kissed him and said, “ *Here is a token that I forgive thee.* ”

My ....we may not to have endure the physical persecution that Stephen endured, but how do you react in the midst of verbal persecution ? Like Stephen, have false statements been made about you ? ( 6:13 ) Have unkind, untrue words been spoken about you ? How have you reacted ? Oh, you have the power to give it, but have you the power to take it ? No back talk, no recrimination, no self-defence, just bearing it all as Stephen did as Christ did ! ( 1 Pet 2:23 ) (1)

#### (2) The SOVEREIGNTY of the Lord Jesus: ( 7:56 )

Think of it ! Heaven was open to his view. And in the same instance he saw Jesus. He saw Him standing ! He saw Him standing at God's right hand ! He saw Him standing to register His approval, His applause. My .... the Scriptures uniformly picture Jesus as seated, but on

this occasion He was “ *standing at the right hand of God.*” Christ came to His feet with arms open to welcome the first martyr home. Beautiful.

(3) The DEITY of the Lord Jesus: ( 7:57-60 )

My .... this was a final proclamation of the Saviour for who “ *can forgive sins but God only ?*” ( Mk 2:7 )  
What a picture ! Stephen with the shining angel face, Stephen on his knees, Stephen heedless of the stones, Stephen talking with the Saviour at Gods right hand. Presently one stone more violent than the rest ended his life and Stephen was asleep .... dead ! No ! Very much alive on the other shore. You see when a believer dies the body sleeps ( Jn 11:11 1 Thes 4:13 ) and the soul goes to be with Christ. ( Phil 1:23 ) Instant death, but instant glory.

Stephen was faithful unto death. ( Rev 2:10 )

In 1948 Jim Elliot wrote in his journal, “ *I seek not a long life but a full one like you Lord Jesus.*” Two years later he wrote, “ *I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those I would have kept on earth till they were older. God is peopling eternity and I must not restrict Him to old men and women.*” Like Stephen Jim Elliot and his 4 friends were martyred for Christ on January 8th 1965 slain by the very people they were trying to reach. The Aucas Indians. “ *Faithful unto death.*”

(1)(2)

### **(3) THE SECRET HE REALISED**

For of Stephen we read that he was a man “ *full of the Holy Ghost.*” ( 6:3 ) Now he isn't the only man in the

world who is full. We all know people who are full enough, the trouble is they are full of the wrong things. Do you recall that frightful phrase “ *full of bitterness,*” ( Rom 3:14 ) Do you know believers who are filled with gall ? ( Heb 12:15 ) Once in a while you have the misfortune of talking to them, and in almost every breath they are exhaling bitterness about something or other. They have just gone sour. They are sour on people, sour on situations, sour on life in general. They are full of bitterness and out it comes in a bitter cascade. The Bible also speaks of those who are “ *full of confusion,*” ( Job 10:15 ) of others who are “ *full of extortion,*” ( Matt 23:25 ) of others who are “ *full of subtlety,*” ( Acts 13:10 ) and of others who are “ *full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity.*” ( Rom 1:29 ) They exude evil. They drip with depravity. What a contrast when we turn to Stephen. Outside of Barnabas Stephen is the only man who bares the distinction of a man, “ *full of the Holy Ghost.*” God had constant control of Stephen's life. Now such a life of fullness,

#### **(a) WAS OBVIOUS IN SUCH A MAN:**

Is this not why the church at Jerusalem chose him as one of the seven ? Now remember the figure at which we are looking is not the figure of an apostle. Stephen was a man of the ranks. He had emerged from “ *among them,*” but it was this man who was living a floodtide. Is it God's plan and purpose that every believer be filled with the Holy Spirit ? Yes ! Paul says, “ *Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess but be filled with the Spirit.*” ( Eph 5:18 ) My .... this Spirit-filled life is not

for a spiritual elite, its for ordinary Christians in ordinary Christian service. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is normal Christian living. Is it such for you ?

***(b) WAS OBVIOUS AT SUCH A MOMENT:***

At what moment ? Well, what moment do you want to take ? At the moment of his election to office, as one of the seven he was filled with Spirit. At the moment when he was Contending for the faith, he was filled with the Spirit. At the moment when he was being stoned to death: he was filled with the Spirit. Stephen was constantly, moment by moment being controlled by the Holy Spirit. Now some of us lose out on this Spirit filled life. Do you know why ? Because of:

*(1) Exaltation of Position:*

Not Stephen even though he was one of the seven.

*(2) Fleshly Persuasion:*

Are you filled with the Holy Spirit when you are debating with your fellow- Christian ? My .... Stephen was debating with the Sanhedrin, and yet when they looked on him they “ *saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.*”

*(3) Physical or Verbal Persecution:*

But not Stephen even though he was being stoned to death. ( 7:55 ) As he commenced his work for God he was filled, as he continued his work for God he was

filled, as he concluded his work for God he was filled. Is this your experience ? Are you moment by moment being filled with the Spirit of God ? (a) (b)

***(c) WAS OBVIOUS TO SUCH A MULTITUDE:***

Look at ( 6:15 ) Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin would recall Moses' shining face. ( Exod 34:29-30 ) It was as though God was saying, “ *This man is not against Moses ! He is like Moses .... he is My faithful servant.*” “ *And all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an Angel.*” ( 6:15 ) Did Saul of Tarsus see that angel face ? One thing is sure he saw that face in death and never forgot it. ( 22:17 ) And Stephen's message, prayer, death were used of God to prepare Saul for his own meeting with the Risen Lord !

Do you know something ? God never wastes the blood of His servants. “ *The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.*” And out of Stephen came Paul. And out of Jim Elliot and his friends has come many Aucas Indians who are now believers. What a life was Stephen's. ***Unto death, Faithful. In death, Graceful. After death, Fruitful. THE FRAGRANCE OF A FULL LIFE !*** A no of years ago Dr. William Stidger wrote a book for pastors entitled, “ ***Preaching out of the Overflow.***” The thesis of his book was that a preacher should always give the impression, “ *Well now if I had time I could go on for another twenty minutes.*” “ ***Preaching out of the Overflow.***”

My .... we should be “ ***Living out of the Overflow.***”

Life in Christ is not meant to be niggardly and just getting by, and going down in defeat. No ! “ *In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*” ( Rom 8:37 ) “ *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you that ye having sufficiency in all things may abound to every good work.*” ( 2 Cor 9:8 ) That’s how Stephen lived. Will you live like that ?