

Bi134 Acts

Lesson Bi134-13 Stephen's Spirit-empowered Witness

Have you ever had someone tell a lie about you? How did you react? In the story of Stephen we learn how he responded when evil people told lies about him. Yet, they did more than just tell lies about him. They cursed him to his face, dragged him out of the city, and finally stoned him to death. He responded by sharing Christ with them and praying for their souls.

You will remember that Stephen was one of the seven men chosen by the people to care for the widows in the Jerusalem church. Because he was full of God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit, he "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). Stephen's miracles, however, angered the radical members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen—persons who had been freed from slavery.

One day, these men approached Stephen and began to argue with him. However, they were embarrassed because they could not stand against his wisdom. He was speaking words that the Holy Spirit was giving him. So they persuaded some men to lie to the temple authorities and say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." Hearing this, the authorities seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. There they produced false witnesses who lied about Stephen, saying that he was blaspheming the temple and the law of Moses. They claimed Stephen had said that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the laws of God. Even as they were speaking, everyone looked at Stephen. They were amazed when they saw that his face was shining like the face of an angel (Acts 6:8-15).

The high priest then asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" At that, Stephen again began to speak by the Spirit. He told the Jewish leaders how God had called and led their father Abraham. He spoke of how God had blessed the descendants of Abraham. Through Moses, God had delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. However, just as the children of Israel had rejected Moses—whom God had sent—they were now rejecting Jesus.

Then Stephen accused them, "You stiff-necked people," he said, "you are just like your fathers. You have always resisted the Holy Spirit, and now you have murdered Jesus, the very one whom God sent to save you" (Acts 7:51-53).

This infuriated his accusers. They became so enraged that they began to grind their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw God's glory. He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. He then cried out, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" This so enraged his opponents that they covered their ears and began to shout at the top of their voices. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. As the stones fell upon Stephen, he prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Then he uttered a final prayer, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and died. Those who took part in the murder of Stephen laid their coats at the feet of a young Jewish Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus who was consenting to Stephen's death.

From this amazing story about Stephen we learn three important lessons about how we should respond when people lie about us and seek to harm us for preaching the gospel.

First, we learn that we should remain full of the Spirit. Like many of us, Stephen had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. But what is more important is that he *remained* full of the Spirit. So when he faced danger, the Spirit came to his aid. Jesus had promised, “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12:11-12). The Spirit was now fulfilling Jesus’ promise.

We must remain full of the Spirit at all times. If we will do this, we can be sure that the Spirit will strengthen us in our time of need. As Stephen was dying, the Holy Spirit gave him a heavenly vision. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” We, like Stephen, can remain full of the Spirit by being committed to Christ’s mission, living holy lives, and praying often in the Holy Spirit.

Second, from the story of Stephen we learn that we should always share the gospel, even in the face of grave danger. Stephen realized it was more important to declare the message of Christ than to preserve his own life. There are times when God calls upon us to preach Christ, even in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. At such times we must never compromise the gospel message. We must, like Stephen, be bold and always “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

At such times we must know that Christ will be with us, just as he was with Stephen. Jesus has promised, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20), and “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb 13:5). Just as Jesus honored Stephen in his death, he will honor us—if we will remain faithful unto him. Remember Jesus’ words: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

Finally, from the story of Stephen we learn that we must always show the love of Christ, even when people attack and abuse us. Stephen died as Jesus died. Both were full of the Holy Spirit. Both showed love for those who were killing them. Just as Jesus prayed for his murderers, Stephen prayed for his. He fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

So, Stephen not only bore witness to Christ in his life, he bore faithful witness to Christ in his death. Jesus has taught us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). We can do this only if we will remain full of the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom 5:5).

This lesson is **important** because it teaches us how we should respond when people persecute us for preaching the gospel. We, like Stephen, should remain full of the Spirit, continue to declare Christ, and always show Christ’s love.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that in order to be faithful during times of persecution, we must remain full of the Holy Spirit and committed to Christ’s mission.

Let's now **review** some important truths we have learned from this lesson.

1. According to our lesson, why is it important that we remain full of the Holy Spirit?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you said, "We must remain full of the Holy Spirit in order that he might give us strength in our time of need," you answered correctly.
2. How will the Holy Spirit help us when people abuse us and lie about us for preaching the gospel?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered, "He will give us boldness to continue testifying about Christ, and he will give us love for those who are abusing us," you are correct.
3. Why is it important that we always show the love of God, even to those who would do us harm?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you said, "By showing the love of God we are being like Jesus who prayed for his enemies from the cross," you answered correctly.

Your **assignment** is to listen to this lesson several times until you can accurately tell the story of Stephen and until you can teach its lessons to others. Not all persecution is verbal and not all leads to death. Discuss with some fellow believers the kinds of persecution they have endured for the sake of Christ. Take time to ask God to help you forgive your persecutors and show them love.