

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Stephen**

#### **Lesson 1: Stephen – A Man Full Of The Spirit And Wisdom**

##### **Reading**

Acts 6:1-7.

##### **A Man Full Of The Spirit And Wisdom**

The Church is not perfect. In fact, you will never find the perfect church. The church is made up of imperfect people. In fact, a real church will have a lot of people within its congregation who are trying to find their way to the truth about life and God. Not only is it true that Christians are not perfect – just forgiven – in these real churches there will be people who are not Christians yet. They feel welcome there however, and over time will process the truth and accept the truth. In the meantime, they will often display their imperfections!

The Church in Jerusalem was made up of people with a Judean background and others with a Hellenistic Greek background, and because of the differences in culture, it was perceived that favouritism was taking place. The Jewish widows were given precedence over the Hellenistic Greek widows.

Quite correctly, the apostles decided that the issue needed dealing with in an appropriate way and so asked the rest of the disciples to choose 7 men to look after the details. I like their character requirements. Choose *those who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom*. Don't go for the materialistic people. Don't go for the accountants and financial planners. Don't go for the business executives or P/R gurus. Find those who are already *known to be full of the spirit and wisdom*.

God's Kingdom operates on different lines to this world, and what may be acceptable in society may not necessarily be appropriate for the work of the Kingdom of God. We need to find people full of the Holy Spirit to be on the ministry teams. Don't just go to fill 'holes' of need. Find the 'right' people.

That is why it is so helpful in churches to find out what the Spiritual Gifts are of the folk in our congregations so we can release them into the ministry God has designed for them. We also need to be wise in our choice of people. We need to make sure they are of proven integrity and spiritual discernment. Wise, rather than arrogant. How many 'problems' in our churches would have been avoided if we had 'done our homework' before appointing inappropriately.

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### **Lesson 1 continued: Stephen – A Man Full Of The Spirit And Wisdom**

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

Stop – before you appoint anyone to fill any role within the church – do your homework and make sure that their spiritual qualifications are as good as their natural talents and work-related experience. The Kingdom of God deserves as much excellence in the spiritual side of ministry – spiritual discernment and wisdom – as it does in excellence of ability.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please help us to fill those roles needing extra personnel with the right people. Help us also discern those who are full of the spirit and wisdom so that our ministries may flourish as well as the Church in Jerusalem after having appointed Stephen and his colleagues.*

#### **Additional readings**

Exodus 31:1-11; Isaiah 61:1-7; Matthew 2:25-40.

#### **Questions**

Why do we rush to fill the ministry gaps we find?

How much more could we achieve if we thought through our people choices more thoroughly?

Why is being full of the spirit and wisdom vital?

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### **Lesson 2: Stephen – The Miracle-working Servant**

#### **Reading**

Acts 6:1-8.

#### **The Miracle-working Servant**

Stephen is the one mentioned first on the list. He was not only full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, but also full of faith. Wow, what a combination. You could really do with a few like Stephen in your church, in your ministry or on your team, couldn't you? I know I would love a few like him around me... (Actually, I'm blessed because I do!)

However, we need to remember what they were being set aside to do. They had not been chosen as the senior pastors, the bishops or the overseas evangelists. These men had been chosen to sort out the daily donated food allocation to the poor people in the church; the widows, in particular, and especially those of other races who felt disadvantaged. Not what most of us would consider to be of the highest ministry value.

The apostles wouldn't agree with us, since we read they actually set them apart to the work and laid hands on them. Wasn't that a bit over the top? After all, these men were only looking after food. Yes, they had to deal with people and that can always be a challenge, but food allocation is hardly at the forefront of ministry, is it? Had they been set apart for worship leading, the music ministry, prayer ministry, counselling and pastoral care, maybe. Yes, and we would, of course, lay hands on our youth ministry team and set them apart but what has food got to do with church or ministry?

Quite a lot, according to the apostles. What an amazing statement follows the commissioning of these men. *So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.* What was the connection? Church growth to food? Priests becoming obedient to the faith? Maybe we should stop and examine this section a bit more and a bit more often.

Of course, the numbers of disciples grew. The apostles were released to do what they should be doing. There was no longer a drain on their time and energy, and they were released to fulfil their God-ordained ministry. But, was there more to it than that?

What impact did these men have in the community? The church was seen to be caring for the widows and the poor in their community, regardless of race or orthodoxy. Good News travels fast. If the Church opens its arms to the needy – the needy will show up. For most of us that is why we don't open our arms to the needy. We don't want 'more work', as we are flat out as it is trying to keep the Christians happy. No wonder our Churches don't grow. Actually, the Church exists for those outside the Church.

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### **Lesson 2 continued: Stephen – The Miracle-working Servant**

The next verse is even more astonishing. Or is it? *Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.* Did he feed 5000 with 7 loaves and 2 fish? We don't know, do we? All we know is that he did signs and wonders. Actually, I think it was the Holy Spirit who did the signs and wonders but Stephen just allowed the Holy Spirit to use him. What if God started doing that through us?

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

Signs and wonders follow obedience to God and His will. I was just doing what God wanted me to. I was just serving the church in the way I knew best, and God started doing all these incredible things. Believe me, I'm sure He will do the same through you if you let Him.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to be faithful in the little things so that You can do the big things through me by the power of Your Holy Spirit – for Your glory. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Luke 10:1-20; 2 Kings 5; Matthew 8:23-27.

#### **Questions**

How do you reach out to your local community?

Who in your church needs to be released into their full ministry?

How can we ensure signs and wonders are seen through our ministry?

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### **Lesson 3: Stephen – A Man Opposed By Those Who Should Be Encouraging Him**

#### **Reading**

Acts 6:9-15.

#### **A Man Opposed By Those Who Should Be Encouraging Him**

Last time, we left Stephen doing signs and wonders. We would expect everyone to be supportive and enthusiastic about that, wouldn't we? Maybe the 'tall poppy syndrome' isn't a Kiwi invention after all. However, as a nation we seem to have embraced it and unfortunately it will infiltrate the Kiwi church if we are not careful. Satan stands opposed to every work of God and we had better wake up to that or he will keep winning the battles.

It was hard for Stephen. I'm sure all he wanted to do was to carry on seeing captives set free and making disciples. After all, that is what Jesus told us to do, wasn't it?

So why was he caught up in these mindless arguments? It's reminiscent of the rubbish Jesus had to deal with from the religious leaders of His day. It also appears Stephen was as successful as Jesus was. He won the arguments but they still didn't wake up and change their ways. So just as with Jesus, they had to find some false witnesses to cause a scene in order to stop Stephen getting on with the ministry he had been God-ordained and set aside to do.

Please notice that it wasn't the pagans who were opposing Stephen. I'm sure they were extremely grateful for all the signs and wonders he did for them and for showing them the way to God. No, it was the fellow believers who were the problem.

Were they arguing about the food distribution? No. Were they complaining that the widows were worse off now under Stephen's leadership than they were before? No. Were they complaining that Stephen was turning them away from Jesus and His words? No.

They were jealous of his ministry and wanted to end it. They couldn't present a rational argument against him because he could refute their nonsense with spirit-based wisdom.

So they decided to throw a spanner in the works by saying he spoke blasphemy against Moses and God. Please note it wasn't against Jesus. Stephen was encountering the same opposition that Jesus did. These people were holding on to their man-made traditions, which they attributed to Moses and, by inference, to God.

Undoubtedly, the very same issues that Jesus came to clarify. How often did Jesus say – *You have heard it said, but I tell you...*? Yes, they were still straining out the gnat and catching a camel! The nub of it was – *We have heard him say this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.*

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### **Lesson 3 continued: Stephen – A Man Opposed By Those Who Should Be Encouraging Him**

Even up against such vehement, vitriolic accusations, the 'light of truth' in Stephen shone so brightly that as the people sitting in the Sanhedrin looked at Stephen, they saw him light up and shine like an angel.

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

Don't be surprised if Satan uses those who should be supporting you to bring you down. But don't worry, the light of your integrity and truth will shine all the brighter through the darkest moments.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to see through those who would seek to discredit me and the ministry I'm involved with. Help me remain true to You and Your calling for my life so that even through the hard times, people will see You shining in and through me. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

John 1:1-18; Matthew 12:1-14; Acts 18:1-17.

#### **Questions**

Why do we hesitate to rejoice with those who are rejoicing?

How can we learn to discern those who may become our adversaries?

What do we do in order to keep true to our faith and ministry when pressed down by discouragers?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 4: Stephen – A Man Who Knew God’s Word And Would Not Compromise It**

#### **Reading**

Acts 7:1-53.

#### **A Man Who Knew God’s Word And Would Not Compromise It**

Stephen was before the Sanhedrin, charged with false accusations. The High Priest asked him if they were true. He didn’t even go there. Instead, he gave a wonderful speech drawing his listeners right back to the time of Abraham and his call by God to leave Mesopotamia and head for the ‘promised land’.

He enlarged on the family history, including references to Isaac, Jacob, the patriarchs and Joseph. He reminded them of the Hebrews’ trip to and stay in Egypt, and how God called Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt; how Moses had been rejected, and yet God had performed miraculous signs and they left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and lived in the Desert.

He reminded the people how the Hebrew leaders wanted to serve a golden calf and return to Egypt. How they forsook God and turned to the worship of stars. How God had given them the Tabernacle as a place for His Name, and how David had wanted to build a Temple but that Solomon was the one who did it.

At that point Stephen quoted the Scriptures that reminded them that God is too big to live in man-made dwellings. Then suddenly, Stephen burst out in righteous indignation; he likened his listeners to the religious leaders that preceded them – those who had rejected God’s ways and killed his prophets and finally Stephen accused them of murdering the Promised Messiah – Jesus.

He ended by challenging them that they had indeed received the Law directly from God but had not put it into practice. He cut through the sham. He ignored their trumped-up accusations and gave them a history lesson, which would also act as a light shining into their darkened souls. He would not succumb to their rhetoric, to their puny ideas, values and hypocrisy. He would try and help them see through their own duplicity and regain the truth of God.

He knew that the Word of God has power and is sharper than any two-edged sword. He knew that his job was to expose the truth so that those who wished to receive it could do so. He would reveal the truth and leave the outcome to God.

That can prove to be risky. That can prove to be dangerous. That can prove to be personally fatal. Which is probably why many people try not to leave the outcome to God, so compromise the message in order to protect the one delivering it.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 4 continued: Stephen – A Man Who Knew God’s Word And Would Not Compromise It**

That was not Stephen’s way. He would not compromise. He would not back down. He would tell it like it is, and allow the Holy Spirit to do His work. Stephen knew that the Kingdom of God and its future was far more important than his own comfort or future plans. He would say his piece and relax in the arms of God.

Oh that we had more people like Stephen alive today. People who will reveal the Word of God as it is and let God do the rest. I guess that is what the *Alpha* course does, doesn’t it?

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

You don’t need to defend the Bible. It is the Word of God. What we need to do is expose it and let God do the rest. You can trust Him; He knows what He is doing!

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please make us more like Stephen. Prepared to accept what the Bible says and help others see the truth so that they can be set free and come into that wonderful relationship with You. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Matthew 19:16-30; Galatians 3:1-14; Daniel 3:8-30.

#### **Questions**

Why do people want to compromise the claims of the Bible?

How should we deal with people who refuse to accept the truth?

How can we get Christian leaders to agree more on the basics and leave the peripheral issues to one side?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 5: Stephen – A Man Who Gave His Life For His Master's Kingdom**

#### **Reading**

Acts 7:54-58.

#### **A Man Who Gave His Life For His Master's Kingdom**

The members of the Sanhedrin erupted. They did not like being spoken to the way Stephen had. He had told it like it was – straight from the hip and the people knew exactly where he was coming from and its logical conclusion. They did not like being called murderers – particularly as it was true.

Understandably, they became furious. Have you noticed how guilt can do that?

Actually it depends on us and how we process it. When Nathan the prophet accused David over David's adultery with Bathsheba, instead of David exploding and killing Nathan, he wept and asked God to forgive him. He repented and got back in line with God's purposes for his life.

These people were just as guilty but, instead of repenting, decided to deflect the 'problem' away from them and onto the innocent Stephen. Sin has a way of trying to justify itself, doesn't it? *Stephen should never have spoken to them that way. He should have tried to win them over. Alienating them was the worst thing he could have done and look what happened next.*

Truth hurts. It exposes falsehood. However, truth is always best. Yes, it may hurt – our pride. It may even hurt my employment, if I am asked to be dishonest and refuse – but in the end, truth will usually exonerate the innocent. Yes, it may be after their death but truth has a habit of exposing wrong sooner or later.

The Bible puts it this way – Numbers 32: 23 *Be sure your sins will find you out.* My parents drummed that into me while I was still very young and it remains with me to this day. I guess it remains with me because over the decades it has proven to be true.

Oh yes, this society may try and convince us that we are victims of our circumstances but the truth will expose that lie in the end. We are responsible for our actions, our attitudes and our choices, and the sooner we learn that the better. The better it will be for us, the better it will be for our families and friends, and the better it will be for society. We are not victims; we are choosers.

Stephen chose to tell the truth. The members of the Sanhedrin chose to kill Stephen, just as they had chosen to kill Jesus, the Son of God.

Stephen, however, looked up and saw Jesus standing at the right hand side of God in all His majestic splendour. What a picture. Not a bad vision to receive just then, was it?

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### **Lesson 5 continued: Stephen – A Man Who Gave His Life For His Master's Kingdom**

Do you recognise the amazing grace of God towards Stephen? That vision did two things for Stephen. Firstly, it proved to Stephen that yes, Jesus did rise from the dead. He was alive – dead men don't stand. Yes, Jesus did ascend into Heaven. Yes, He was accepted by God the Father, so His Death was adequate for our sins – we are forgiven. It also showed Jesus standing in honour of the step he was taking; Stephen was the first Christian martyr to give his life for the Kingdom of God.

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

You also need a cause worth dying for, in order to live life to the full. There is no greater privilege than giving your life for Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. One day we will be with Him forever. Don't worry if others make you get there earlier than you planned.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me remember that this life is only temporary at best. I am here to tell others of all You have done for me and the wonderful privilege it is to be one of Your children. Help me be courageous until the end – for the extension of Your Kingdom. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

Philippians 3:7-14; Romans 16:1-16; Hebrews 11:32-40.

#### **Questions**

Have you got a cause worth dying for?

How is Christianity worth dying for?

Why is it – we don't really know how to live, until we know what we would die for?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 6: Stephen – A Man Who Even In Death Forgave His Murderers**

#### **Reading**

Acts 7:57-60.

#### **A Man Who Even In Death Forgave His Murderers**

Jim Elliot, that great missionary to the Auca Indians, who along with Nate Saint and his colleagues was speared to death, is reported to have said this – *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.* What did he give? His life. Why could he not keep it? Because we all die some day and he had a passion to tell others about Jesus. So what did he gain? Eventually, the whole tribe accepted Christ as their Saviour – it's a magnificent story of grace, love, forgiveness and perseverance – through their wives. You can read about it in *Jungle Pilot* and *Through gates of splendour*. What could he not lose? The eternal salvation of those who finally accepted Christ's offer of Eternal Life.

After the eruption in the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders rushed at Stephen, dragged him outside and stoned him to death. Dr Luke records that those stoning Stephen left their clothes *at the feet of a young man named Saul* (of Tarsus). Chapter 8 of Acts begins, *And Saul was there giving approval to his (Stephen's) death.*

That Saul went on to murder many more 'Followers of the Way' in a sort of one-man crusade to eliminate the early church. However, he was to have a 'Damascus experience' that would change his life forever. He met the risen, living Jesus Christ, and went on to become one of the greatest leaders, missionary pioneers, apostles and apologists Christianity has ever known.

Every Christian owes a huge debt to Saul, who became Paul, the great letter writer and servant of Jesus Christ and His Church.

No doubt being an eyewitness to Stephen's martyrdom had an amazing affect on him. Initially, it gave him a blood-thirst for more victims who were trying to undermine his hereditary theology and traditional dogmas. However, somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind must surely have been that final act of Stephen's.

*Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

That act was not just some magnanimous gesture of goodwill. It was a spiritual time bomb. In asking the Lord to forgive his murderers, he released the power of God to act in mercy and grace. He set them free to receive forgiveness. He laid the foundation for their eventual repentance.

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### **Lesson 6 continued: Stephen – A Man Who Even In Death Forgave His Murderers**

The Scriptures tell us that there is power in the tongue. We can release life or death. That's where we are introduced to the concept of curses. Stephen wanted to make sure that in the dying seconds of his life he would do everything he possibly could to assist his opposers to come to the same faith and experience, the same wonderful life that he had.

Maybe too, he remembered what Jesus prayed whilst on the Cross – *“Father into Your hands I commit my spirit”* and *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*

#### **Stephen would say to us today...**

No matter what opposition or hardship you are facing from people today – forgive them. Often they don't know what they are doing. Often they think they are doing what is best but are misinformed. Since we know the truth, we can relax and offer forgiveness, and thereby release the Holy Spirit to finish His work in them for the glory of God.

#### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to be more like Stephen – and Jesus. So I look beyond the problems of the present and remember the goal is to see everyone I know come into contact with You and experience a wonderful and eternal relationship with You. Amen.*

#### **Additional readings**

2 Samuel 16:5-14; Luke 23:26-34; 1 Peter 4:12-19.

#### **Questions**

How do we get to the place where we can forgive those who mistreat us?

Why is it so important that we forgive them?

Who is the person you need to forgive right now?