

The full life is the life focused on proclaiming the work of Jesus

What makes for a full life? *How do you measure fullness?* Is it in living to old age, with financial security and good health? Early retirement, extravagant vacations, straight A's on a report card or completion of the school year to enjoy the freedoms of summer? No broken bones or visits to the ER? To be recognized by strangers because of your place in society, or to be at the top rung in your workplace, with the exclusive exercise of power? To be free of all conflict and trouble? This week I was considering questions like this, and considering the life of our Lord Jesus. He lived only to about age 33, and the first 30 years of that were in relative obscurity. A carpenter, and the son of a carpenter. Then, when he did begin his public ministry, it was pretty humble. People came to Jesus and said they would follow him, to which he responded that "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20).*" That doesn't sound much like the American dream.

Scripture Passage: Acts 6:8-15

Stephen offers us an opportunity to recalibrate our measure of success, our valuation of fullness. He exemplifies a life lived under the Lordship of Christ, trusting in the goodness and sovereignty of God. Stephen lives a God-honoring life, which is evident even in the face of Stephen, to say nothing of his words and deeds. Through Stephen's witness we learn that **the full life is the life focused on proclaiming the work of Jesus.**

Christianity as a Life of Fullness (v.8)

1. v.8 "*And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*"

1. Stephen is a man of godly character, and he's worth a careful look at. That's not just my opinion, but look at the ink Luke gives in writing Acts to tell us about Stephen. When he's listed as one of the seven chosen to help in the service to widows, Luke adds a little comment about his character. Next we come to this section, where Stephen is more properly introduced, again focusing on his character. Then, in **Acts 7** we have the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts; not spoken by Peter or Paul, but by Stephen. Following his sermon he's stoned to death, the first martyr of the Christian church. **Acts 8:2** tells us that devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. **Acts 11:19** tells us about "*those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen...*" So influential is Stephen that years later, after three of Paul's missionary journeys, when Paul is captured in Jerusalem, he makes mention of the day he was there at the stoning of Stephen. What an impression this man made! His was a life of fullness.

1. **Acts 6:3** "*Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...*" We've discussed being full of the Spirit as we've been working through Acts. Believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion (**1 Cor. 12:13**), which is a one-time event. There are subsequent fillings, though. It's something we should desire, and something Paul even told the Ephesian church that they should pursue (**Eph. 5:18**). So here we have Stephen full of the Spirit, not quenching the Holy Spirit or grieving the Holy Spirit. He's also full of wisdom, able to apply a knowledge of God's Word to the situations he encounters. We'll see this become really clear when we study his speech next week.
2. **Acts 6:5** "*And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...*" Stephen is said to be full of faith as well. What's special is not the kind of faith, but what seems to be emphasized is his degree of faith. He lives and breathes in trust of God.
3. **Acts 6:8** "*And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*" Lastly, here, we read he is full of grace and power. It seems what Luke is trying to communicate with "full of grace" is that Stephen has been so changed by the experience of grace in his life that he is a gracious person, someone winsome. One commentator describes it as "spiritual charm." G. Campbell Morgan, the predecessor to Martyn Lloyd Jones at Westminster, explained this as "sweetness and strength...merged in one personality." He was the kind of man people were attracted to, that they wanted to be around. He's also full of power, which is manifest in his performing great wonders and signs (something reserved only for the apostles up to this point in Acts).
4. **Stephen's is a life of fullness. He is exemplary in this, and to be imitated. We're told such a great deal about Stephen by learning what he is full of. A character profile like this doesn't just happen. It's the result of a faithful life, one devoted to God and in pursuit of obedience to him, even in the daily and seemingly mundane.**

Transition: The Christian life, even in faithfulness and fullness, isn't promised to be an easy life, though. We see that in Stephen's example. Christianity is a life opposed.

Christianity as a Life Opposed (vv.9-14)

v.9 *"Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen...rose up and disputed with Stephen."* - God is glorified by the witness of his saints, both when they are accepted and celebrated and when they are opposed and persecuted.

1. There were some who accepted and celebrated Stephen. As a result of his ministry, along with the other 6 chosen to serve and the focus on the word and prayer by the apostles, *"the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7)."* God is glorified in this. But, God is also glorified when faithful witnesses are opposed and persecuted.
 1. **1 Peter 2:20-24** *"For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."*
 2. **When you suffer wrongly, having done no wrong, or when you do good and are opposed and endure, this is a gracious thing in God's eyes. When you're right, and you know you're right, and God knows you're right, and others say you're wrong, and you suffer for it, how do you respond? When you make a decision or take an action at work that you know is right and in line with God's Word, only to find out it's out of line with work policy, how do you respond? Maybe when you're taking a final at school and you know the answer they want on the test, but you know it's not the real answer based on the eternal and inerrant truth of God's Word, how do you answer? Do you mutter and complain? In situations like this we have the glorious opportunity to show Christ to those opposing us.**
 3. Here we have the opposition of a group belonging to the synagogue of the Freedmen. These would be Jews who have been set free from slavery, or the descendants of Jews set free from slavery. These would all, most likely, be Hellenistic Jews, like we think Stephen himself was. There's even a real possibility that this would have been Stephen's home synagogue. They rise up and dispute with him. This isn't friendly, healthy debate and dialogue, but a more vehement opposition. But, as vehement as they were, they were weak.

The Opposition's Weakness (vv.9-10)

1. **v.10** *"But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."* - Really, it's no wonder they couldn't withstand. Stephen was *"full of the Spirit and of wisdom"* (Acts 6:3), so withstanding is an impossible feat. This is **1 Peter 3:13-16** in action. Realizing their weakness and inability to win an argument against Stephen, they change tactics.

The Opposition's Tactic (vv.11-14)

1. **v.11** *"Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'" - This can carry the idea of bribery or hiring.
 1. John Stott comments on this, that "when arguments fail, mud has often seemed an excellent substitute." This is precisely what they begin to do. They can't argue with him any longer, because they'll lose. So, instead, they find a way to cover him in mud.*
2. **v.12** *"And they stirred up the people...and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council."* - This group, stirred up by believing the lies spoken against Stephen, bring him before the Sanhedrin council. This is serious.
3. **vv.13-14** *"...and they set up false witnesses...for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."* - This is very similar to the accusations made by false witnesses against Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin.
 1. **Matt. 26:59-63a** (cf. **Mark 14:55-61a**) False witnesses took the words of Jesus but twisted and distorted them into something other than what he actually said.
 1. **John 2:18-21** Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body, not the building where they were standing.
 2. **Matthew 5:17** *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*

3. Those witnessing against Stephen are said to be false witnesses. The problem is that they misunderstood and misapplied what Stephen was saying. **V.13** they're recorded as saying Stephen was speaking against the holy place and the law, but he wasn't. We'll see this in his speech next week, but Stephen knew the story of redemption, and knew that it made a straight line to Christ. Because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the old forms are changed. There is a new covenant (**Heb. 9:11-15; Rev. 21:22-23**). Salvation is by grace through faith, not based on the blood of bulls and goats, but through the perfect one-time sacrifice of the Son of God.

Transition: Christianity is a life of fullness, a life opposed, but even in that opposition it remains a life of radiance.

Christianity as a Life of Radiance (v.15)

1. **v.15** *"And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."* - They're said to be gazing at him, looking intently, attentively, even staring at him. Can you blame them? He looked like an angel, even as they breathe out lies against him.

1. **Exodus 34:29** *"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."*
2. **Matthew 17:1-2** *"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light."*
3. Moses was in the presence of God receiving the law, and his face was changed, full of radiance. Jesus was in the presence of the Father and fulfilling the law, and his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. Now Stephen is testifying to the work of Jesus in fulfilling the law, and his face is like that of an angel. This is a mark of God's approval of Stephen and his message. Opposed by the world, but favored by God.

Conclusion: I hate to spoil this, but I need to jump ahead just briefly to **Acts 7:55-56**. Stephen's life is ended. But it's a full life. A brilliant light radiating the glory of God to those around him, and bearing witness even to this day as we read and study and seek to apply the example given to us by Stephen. Even in his death he is focused on the person and work of Jesus. The full life is the life focused on proclaiming the work of Jesus.

Family

Table Talk



June 10, 2018

Family Discussion

1. Take a few moments and list some of the ways that the world measures success or fullness. Then, compare that list with what is told to us about Stephen. What observations can you make about similarities or differences?
2. Are all of the things that made your list for how the world measures success sinful? I would bet that not all of them are. But the problem is that they shouldn't be a measure of success. Read Matthew 6:25-33 and see what Jesus says about where our focus should be. How would this instruct us to measure success?
3. We read in v.33 to seek FIRST the kingdom of God. Why does this need to be first?
4. If you decided that when you woke up tomorrow morning your focus was going to be on seeking first God's kingdom, how would your regular daily routine change? What would you do differently?

GOD'S TRUTH

The full life is the life focused on proclaiming the work of Jesus.

Key Verse

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

TABLE READING

Lead your kids into God's Word...

1. Acts 6:3, 5, 8
2. Matthew 6:25-33
3. Matthew 6:33; Romans 12:1-2



Scripture Memory: James 1:27

"AND THESE WORDS THAT I COMMAND YOU TODAY SHALL BE ON YOUR HEART. YOU SHALL TEACH THEM DILIGENTLY TO YOUR CHILDREN, AND SHALL TALK OF THEM WHEN YOU SIT IN YOUR HOUSE, AND WHEN YOU WALK BY THE WAY, AND WHEN YOU LIE DOWN, AND WHEN YOU RISE. YOU SHALL BIND THEM AS A SIGN ON YOUR HAND, AND THEY SHALL BE AS FRONTLETS BETWEEN YOUR EYES. YOU SHALL WRITE THEM ON THE DOORPOSTS OF YOUR HOUSE AND ON YOUR GATES." - DEUTERONOMY 6:6-9 (ESV)