

The Holy Spirit

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⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 6-NIV)

Brad Haugh was a smoke jumper.

What is that? It is a specialized wildland firefighter who parachutes into remote, inaccessible areas to combat wildfires. They are the first line of defense for fires in areas where traditional access is difficult or impossible.

With fire behind him and a ridge in front of him, this smoke jumper needed every ounce of energy to escape over the ridge and flee with his life. Brad was one of 49 fire fighters caught in a wildfire on the ridge of a mountain in Colorado, seven miles west of Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

14 firefighters had already lost their lives. Flames reached over 300 feet. The giant wall of fire traveled a quarter of a mile in 2 minutes. The estimated speed of the fire was 18 miles per hour. The tools left behind by the fleeing fire fighters were incinerated by heat that reached 2000 degrees.

Radios were filled with voices yelling, "Run! Run! Run! Brad Haugh was still 150 feet from the top of the hill before the fire swallowed everything in its path.

Suddenly Brad lunged for the summit and tumbled over the back side, on the other side and as he descended into a ravine, he looked back to see an incredible wall of fire. (*Help Is Here*, pg. 87-88)

Most of us have never experienced such an intensity of fire, but we are familiar with fire, nonetheless.

- * Your mom heats up a needle, to remove a sliver or lance a sore. What does she use to heat the needle? A flame. She says, "I want to kill the germs, and she goes on "fire does that, it purifies."

- * Your hands are cold, as you camp out in the cold of the night. Where do you extend your cold fingers? Over a flame.
- * An old stove is turned on and the glow of red and blue flames heat up hot water for cooking. What turns cold water into hot water? A flame.
- * In the back yard, at night the burning of old branches and logs provides the perfect setting for making smores. With a perfect marshmallow stick in tow, you extend the marshmallow over “**what**” to make it golden brown or toasty black. **What?** A flame dancing in the night sky.

Fire is a part of life in so many ways, far beyond the few examples I have sited. For that reason, in our study of the book of Acts, we can’t help but notice that fire and the Holy Spirit appear in the same scripture. Same sentence. Same story.

Today, we meet an on-fire and full of the Holy Spirit servant of God, named Stephen who is one minute serving the hungry and human needs of widows, in the next minute he is being grilled over a scorching flame of religious heat.

Stephen is charged with blasphemy and a sordid other list of intolerable activities the religious leadership announced, guilty as charged.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 6-NIV)

Please make a mental note, when the Sanhedrin are in a bad mood theologically, they are not shy to put a would-be blasphemer to death. As Jesus can report this to you firsthand.

Stephen is the first martyr of this growing vibrant church that is changing the world. We meet Stephen at the end of chapter 6; he is the first Christian martyr. Stephen is the first Christian to be killed for his testimony of Christ.

Stephen and 6 other disciples full of the Holy Spirit were chosen out of 1000’s of potential candidates, vetted by the apostles to make sure the food bank was fully stocked. To make sure the meals on wheels had leadership. To solve the dilemma that *Hellenistic widows were getting overlooked in the daily distribution of food.* (Acts 6:2)

It turns out that Stephen not only had a servant’s heart, loved people but he was a **great preacher**. Stephen was head of the class in his Torah classes, and he had an exceptional grasp of Jewish history.

⁸ *Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.*

But, before we listen to Stephen's defense in front of the same Sanhedrin, that crucified Jesus, more about this idea, the Holy Spirit will baptize you with fire.

Jesus' own cousin John the Baptist announces, "*he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" (Matt 3:11). What a great biographical introduction.

- (1) **Why** didn't John give Jesus a rosier outlook on the Holy Spirit's activity, like he will give you happy feelings.

Because when you are facing a hostile crowd, and your future is uncertain, you need fire, not good feelings.

- (2) **Why** didn't John give Jesus a more positive outlook on the Holy Spirit's activity, like he will enhance your self-esteem.

Because when you are staring death in the face, you don't need self-esteem, you need scriptural promises from God's word that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say:

¹² *The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the moment when you need them. (Luke 12:12-Voice)*

- (3) **Why** didn't John tell us Jesus would meet all our needs as a Holy Spirit benefit, like he will pay your bills.

Because when you are taking your final lap around the track, you don't need bills paid, you need to make unprecedented investment in God's kingdom with giving.

Jesus mandate to his followers was to preach the good news, heal and deliver the sick and care for the poor.

And this mandate was being fulfilled in the power of the Holy Spirit and fire. Since the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, just a few months before with tongues...

³ *They saw what seemed to be tongues of **fire** that separated and came to rest on each of them. (Acts 2-NIV)*

As we have moved through the chapters of the book of Acts, the disciples have been **packing heat**. Holy Spirit heat! The disciples not only spoke with tongues of fire, at the first Pentecost, fire showed up everywhere these disciples went in Jerusalem.

Peters' sermons have been on fire.

The disciples' testimonies have landed them in jail, where the preaching has continued. Fire lit up the cell blocks.

The crowds are large in the temple courtyard as the disciple's minister in sign and wonders. Healings. Jail breaks. Supernatural deaths have purified the body of Christ.

Now, we meet a disciple and deacon named Stephen so on fire, that his face is angelic in intensity.

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6-NIV)

This idea of the Holy Spirit packing heat goes all the way back to the baptism of Jesus. Look at in Matt 3.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt 3:11-NIV)

While the disciples are packing heat, healing, and Holy Spirit power, we are going to see that **heat is good for the heart.**

Do you have a heart that wants heat?

Do you have a heart that wants igniting?

Do you have a heart that wants purification?

Surrender your one and only life to Jesus Christ. Then Jesus will baptize you in the Holy Spirit. Jesus will submerge you, immerse you and plunge you into the very power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 1:5, we learn the Holy Spirit will flood every compartment-Bapto "to immerse."

⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1)

In ancient times this word was used to describe a sunken ship, dipped morsel or dying of a garment.

As Jesus stepped out of the Jordan river dripping wet, and empowered from above, so you step forth into your world and reality ready for every challenge, every threat, every blessing, and every accusation from the evil one waiting to take you out.

Don't overlook there is a real adversary out there waiting to take you out, take you down,

... to stone you with gossip that leaves you bloody,

...threats that leave your bones broken,

... and slander that cuts and leaves open wounds.

At the end of Acts 7, we see a demonized mob that is bent on stopping Stephen from offering God's grace to a needy world.

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. (Act 7-NIV)

It may not be a crowd yelling, it may not be people bullying and it may not be stones hitting, but you are being attacked by an evil force that has one purpose and that is to take you out, take you down, to stop you from advancing in the grace of God.

How many today have a sense of awareness of an evil power, evil influence that has its attention focused on your life? Let ask it again...how many today sense an evil power, evil influence encroaching on your life? Oh, many, many.

Let's rewind the film and go back to a sweeter setting where Stephen is taking care of the poor. Showing compassion for the needy. He is carrying out his call in the power of the Holy Spirit given to him by his brothers and sisters in Christ.

While Stephen is delivering food, he found himself in red-hot debate with unbelieving Jews.

In the city of Jerusalem there were many synagogues, likely 100's where God's people met to worship, study scripture and even socialize.

Among the synagogues in Jerusalem, one was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

Freedman were ex-slaves who served in the Romans wars who were given their freedom at the end of the wars, and many had returned to Jerusalem and come together to offer support.

Hardened by war. Tough in battle. The Freedman had seen their share of death, destruction, and suffering. This was no soft synagogue of males. Those in attendance came from all over the world of Asian and Africa.

It is in this synagogue that Stephen finds an opportunity to teach about Jesus Christ. Stephen proves to be a remarkable authority on Jesus Christ and a first-rate debater, and this infuriates his Freedman audience of ex-slaves with a military and war background.

Unable to refute and silence Stephen's wisdom and power in the supernatural the Jewish Freedman break the 9th commandment, to not bear false witness against your neighbor. They secretly induce some witnesses to speak against Stephen. In other words, they coerce them with money to falsify their testimony against Stephen.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true?” To this he replied, “brothers and fathers, listen to me.” Then for the next almost 60 verses, gives the Jewish Freeman a star-studded history lesson.

Stephen gave his audience a star-studded history lesson.

1. God’s presence and work are not limited to the geographical lands of Israel.
2. Israel had a bad habit of rejecting God’s messengers.
3. The tabernacle and the temple were partial images of spiritual encounters that would one day be fulfilled in Christ.
4. Freshly infused by the Holy Spirit Stephen experienced spiritual realities that guarded him during death.

As his sermon progressed the crowd got more agitated because they realized Stephen was calling them out for not knowing this God, for not following the law, for crucifying Christ.

Read verse 51-53 of Acts 7.

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious, and they gnashed their teeth at him. What happened next is clear, a mob of Jews threatened by Stephen’s message of Jesus atoning death, rushed upon Stephen, dragged him out of the city, threw him into a pit, and began to stone.

All the while Stephen is having this supernatural encounter with the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7-NIV)

Why did Stephen die?

- He declared that anyplace God wants to reveal himself, is just as good as the tabernacle or temple. (Acts 7:2,9,30-34,38,44)
- He insisted that God did not live in man-made buildings. (Acts 7:48-50)
- He accused Israel’s leadership of rejecting God. (Acts 7:51-52)
- He called out the law’s do-gooders for not obeying the law. (Acts 7:53)

What’s happening before our textual eyes is clear to see:

The religious establishment will kill for dos and don'ts, Jesus followers will die for him, with shining faces and unlimited mercy.

Stephen dies like Jesus, forgiving those who are stoning him. With loud laments Stephen is buried, and the church of Jerusalem is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Acts 1:8, is happening as told by Jesus himself, *And you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world.*

Who wants the Holy Spirit and fire like a hot iron, to straighten out wrinkled areas of your life so you no longer need to hide them?

Before I was married, I would often iron a shirt to go with a suit jacket. Instead of ironing the whole shirt, I just ironed that which was visible. Don't do with your life, what I did with my dress shirt.

In a day when coat and tie, was more common in the ministry and I had no budget for dry cleaning, I learned to launder and iron my shirts myself.

I became a Jedi master at the art of ironing collars and cuffs. Yes, I know what you are thinking, what if you wanted to take your jacket off?

Yes, that was the downside to my ironing only collars and cuffs, the other downside was there were many times I wanted to take my jacket off. Why? I was a youth pastor in Texas. Hot. Steamy. Humid.

Who wants the Holy Spirit and fire when managed and contained by God to burn away the vegetation of sin from your life?

When Jesus wants to baptize us in the Holy Spirit and fire it is so we can bear more fruit. *While every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. (John 15:2-NIV)*

Our Father is a Gardner, and he loves to do some pruning. Farmers will often burn over a field so it will produce more crop growth in the future. While farmers burn their fields to clear crop residue, control weeds, remove pests it is this last benefit I am thinking of...to improve soil fertility. Productivity. To increase the yield of harvest.

Fresh burned over ground from fire removes competing vegetation, removes weak and dead trees giving more room for stronger trees to grow and keeps stands of trees open letting in more sunlight.

Light it up and burn away Holy Spirit and fire.

The Holy Spirit and fire come not just to purify us (of sin), but to beautify us, not just to cleanse us, but to crown us.

Who wants the Holy Spirit and fire to ignite and combust some activity in your life?

Perhaps the greatest quality of fire is energy. It is the source of electric current. It empowers coal burning engines. It fuels stoves. Fire combusts. Fire ignites.

Take a beaker and put a flame under it. If you put some liquid in it and heat it up. When you get it to a certain temperature it changes the properties.

Now the water boils at 212°. When you heat water up to 212° it becomes steam. This releases a lot of energy. When a lot of boring water changes into steam you can do some incredible things with it-power a ship or a train. You can do a lot with this type of experience.

God is into fire. Raising people to the boiling point. People get to the boiling point when they are fully surrendered. Fully devoted. That's when people care for lost folks. Use their gifts. Give generously to God's work. Share their faith.

Who wants the Holy Spirit and fire to protect you from the enemy's encroachment on your life?

Fire is a protective element. Fire protects. The middle eastern shepherd often puts a fire ring around his sheep fold at night to protect the sheep from wild beasts.

I myself will be a wall of fire around it...and I will be its glory within. (Zech 2:5-NIV)

The Holy Spirit and fire deflect 1000's of temptations. The Holy Spirit and fire extinguish the fiery darts of the enemy.

Take the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all of the flaming arrows of the evil one. (Eph 6:16-NIV)

Finally, the Holy Spirit and fire wants to deliver you from sin, through Jesus' Christ atoning death and bring Holy Spirit healing to all areas of your life impacted by your sin.

Look at Acts 10:44 – This is the Holy Spirit who restores-Epi-pipto, “to fall upon.”

*⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit **came on** all who heard the message. (Acts 10:44)*

The word epi-pipto, conveys the idea of the Holy Spirit falling on a person to bring restoration. A beautiful picture of this is seen with the return of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:20.

*²⁰⁻²⁴ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still some distance off, his father saw him and his heart went out to him, and he ran and **fell on his neck** and kissed him. (Luke 15-JBPhillips)*

So many translations read, the father hugged, enfolded, and embraced the son; the proper word is the father **fell on the neck** of the boy and kissed him.

To fall upon, is the work of the Holy Spirit and fire when we are being restored, God loves you so much, he will touch, embrace, and fall upon your sinfulness, thus causing the sin to be absorbed and consumed into God's forgiveness and grace.

Alter Call

Stand if you want the Holy Spirit and fire to straighten out the wrinkles and worries, the creases and carnality so you no longer need to hide them.

Stand if you want the Holy Spirit and fire to burn off the unwanted vegetation of sin from your life.

Stand if you want the Holy Spirit and fire to ignite some activity in your life. If you want God to raise the boiling point of your spiritual life, stand.

Stand if you want the Holy Spirit and fire to protect you from the enemy's encroachment on your life?

Father,

Jesus, baptize me in the Holy Spirit and fire, as you said you would through John the Baptist (Matt 3:11). Everything that is good about fire I receive as a blessing from the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and fire are the ultimate purifiers, so remove the defilement of sin from my life.

The Holy Spirit and fire are not always enjoyable, as they come as discipline, disappointment, and deliverance. Yet, Holy Spirit and fire produce God's ultimate good.

Holy Spirit, I invite you to ignite, combust and light on fire God's work in my life.

In Jesus Name,

Amen.