

“They’re Real People! — Jim and Steve”

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Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.
⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him.
⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” [ESV]

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So far we have explored the biographical information of several key people who played major roles in the beginnings of the Christian faith. What we have seen is that they were real people, well-known within their communities. There was both the evidence contained in the New Testament, and the evidence from non-Christian sources from the same period.

This time, we look at the unfortunately shortened lives of two people — Jim Zebedee and Steve the Greek.

Jim, or James, was the brother of John the Beloved Apostle who wrote the Gospel, three epistles which bear his name, and the Apocalypse. We first meet Jim by the Sea of Galilee where he was fishing with his brother and father. Jesus had simply said, “Follow me, and I will make you ‘Fishers of men.’” [Matthew 4:18-22.]. They left their dad standing by his boat.

Later, Jesus gave them both a nickname — “Sons of Thunder” — which suggests that they had rather short fuses, hot tempers. [Mark 3:17].

What a transformation happened to them as they followed Jesus! When you read John’s Gospel, or his three epistles, it’s hard to imagine him being short-tempered, always ready to pick a fight. However, there is a flash-back indicating that the short-temper was always just beneath the surface even in his old age. In his third Epistle, he mentions an elder in his congregation named Diotrephes.

“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to, and puts them out of the church.” [3 John 1:9-10]

The man refused to honor John and his colleagues as pastoral leaders of the congregation, and even opposed those who *did* honor them. Diotrephes even “put them out of the church.” He disfellowshipped the Apostle John? Incredible! Yet true!

It’s odd, isn’t it, to realize that some things never change. When the congregation should have been drawing closer to each other in fellowship and united mission, this man was dividing the congregation and opposing their pastor in partisan politics! What a tragic testimony to the

impact of selfish, sinful human nature.

There is another irony here. While James and John were brothers, James was martyred at the beginning of Christian history, while John survived to the old age of over 100 years!

At Pentecost, it is clear that ALL of the disciples, including Jim, and the women like Mary, Joanna, and Susanna, were preaching under the power of the Holy Spirit:

“...we hear *them* telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” [Acts 2:11; see whole story in verses 1-41]

Yet just a few weeks later, Herod Agrippa, attempting to please the Sanhedrin, executed Jim Zebedee with the sword!

“About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread.” [Acts 12:1-3]

We know that this was at least a year after Christ’s own death and resurrection. Herod did this during the Feast of Unleavened Bread — the Passover season. This would have been just nine-months after Pentecost and the baptism of the Holy Spirit! Jim Zebedee, the brother of John, only enjoyed the first nine-months of Christian history!

I can’t explain this. Most of the others lived for at least a decade or more, walking all over the Mediterranean world with the message of the risen Christ. Why was Jim Zebedee the first to die so soon?

It gets worse, however. Within a couple of years, persecution resulting in death for the early believers intensified. Foremost among the persecutors was a member of the Sanhedrin named Saul.

Keep in mind that the people we have met so far were all well-known in Jerusalem — Theophilus was of the High Priestly family, son of Annas, brother-in-law of Caiaphas. Nicodemus was one of the three richest men in Jerusalem. The woman — Joanna, who supported Jesus from her personal wealth — was Theophilus’ grand-daughter. Mary of Magdala had a reputation all her own.

Then there was Gamaliel the Great! The highest rabbinic authority of his time, he had interceded with the Sanhedrin to protect the Apostles! After the council commanded them to stop preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter and the rest of the Apostles *together* said, “We must obey God rather than men!” They then repeated the Gospel story. When the Sanhedrin heard this, “they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” [Acts 5:27-42]. Gamaliel the Great saved their lives!

The safety Gamaliel provided was not to last, however. It began with the first split in the Christian Church involving potlucks. The Greek believers accused the Hebrew believers of cheating their widows out of food! The Apostles solved the problem by ordaining seven “waiters” from the Greek speaking believers to organize the food distribution. Among these was Steve the Greek. These seven were the first ordained deacons.

Steve attended an ethnic synagogue called “The Assembly of the Freedmen.” Steve was a Greek proselyte to Judaism, had been circumcised, and attended this synagogue. However, this synagogue was made up of Greeks, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians, and Asians. The Assembly of the Freedmen was made up of non-Hebrew, Greek-speaking Jews.

Steve preached the resurrection of Jesus to them in their own language. Unable to refute him, they enlisted the Sanhedrin to stop him: “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” Arresting him, they hired false witnesses against him, who claimed “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 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.” [Acts 6:11]

The tribunal turned to hear his defense. He recounted the whole history of the Jews from Abraham to the present. When he came to the end of his long, historical narrative, he sealed his own fate.

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels yet did not keep it.” [Acts 7:51-53]

He probably could have been a little bit more tactful. As it was, the result was devastating.

“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him... they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.” [Acts 7:54, 57-58.]

Jesus rewarded Steve, however. As the rage rose in intensity, Steve looked up —

“And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’” [Acts 7:55-56]

This Revelation of the risen and exalted Christ caused the first “Great Tribulation.”

“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” [Acts 8:1]

It’s tragic, but true — Jesus had commanded His followers to go to every nation, yet they stayed locally, forming a Messianic ghetto instead. This persecution was the beginning of the story of Saul the Persecutor, who became Paul the Preacher.

Persecution does that. When our lives are on the line, we have to decide: shall we live totally for Christ, or deny Him in Laodicean lethargy? True discipleship is costly. Persecution causes commitment.

The same is true of all the trials and tribulations which harass our lives. They are catalysts for commitment. It is true that when the “going gets tough,” that’s when the true followers of Christ really get going.

This raises a question: Does it really take trial, tribulation, persecution, economic failure, disaster, mud-slides, brush fires, personal loss, to bust *us* out of the four walls of our own spiritual ghettos to get us out into the world with the Gospel? What does it cost to make us true, living, active disciples? A good stoning perhaps?

For Further Contemplation:

Paul was eager to get about his Master’s business. Soon the voice which had so earnestly disputed with Stephen, was heard in the same synagogue fearlessly proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God—advocating the same cause that Stephen had died to vindicate... that Jesus, who had been crucified, was the Son of God. [Ellen G. White, *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, p. 37.]