

The Ministry of Stephen Acts 6:1-7:53

Introduction

The apostles continued their ministry of preaching and teaching. The church continued to grow. However, as the number of believers increased, it became harder to meet the needs of everyone. There were only twelve apostles but thousands of believers who had physical and spiritual needs. In Acts 6 and 7, Luke shows how the problem of meeting some of those needs was solved by choosing qualified men to serve in the church. Luke also introduces one of those servants, Stephen, with the story of his brief but powerful ministry.

Outline of Acts 6:1-7:53

- I. Stephen's Service in the Church - Acts 6:1-15
- II. Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin - Acts 7:1-53

I. Stephen's Service in the Church - Acts 6:1-15

The church was growing rapidly and a problem arose. By the Holy Spirit's direction, the apostles were able to deal with the problem quickly. New leaders were chosen to help with the needs of the ministry. Stephen was one of those men. Notice that the men were chosen (6:5) and not volunteers. They were appointed to their task by God.

There were two groups of Jews in Jerusalem: the native (Judea) Hebrews and the Hellenist Hebrews. The native Hebrews kept the Hebrew customs, spoke Aramaic, and considered themselves better than the Hellenists. The Hellenists were Jews who had lived in other nations. They were not as strict in observing customs. They only spoke Greek and the language of the country they came from. There was conflict between the two groups before they became believers and it continued after.

The apostles asked the congregation to select seven men to oversee the distribution of food for the needy. Each man needed to be *of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit*, and full of *wisdom*. One of the men chosen was Stephen.

Stephen's ministry included more than distributing food to the needy. In addition to being *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom* (verse 3) and *full of faith* (verse 5), *Stephen was full of grace* (NASB) and *power*. He performed *great wonders and signs*, which were probably miraculous healings like the apostles.

We learn that Stephen had a formal debate with Jews from the *Synagogue of the Freedmen*. This was probably a group of Jews whose ancestors had been slaves in Rome. They had received their freedom, returned home to Jerusalem, and started their own **synagogue**. Having come from outside of Judea, they were Greek-speaking Hellenists.

These Hellenist Jews were unable to win their argument with Stephen because he had the power of the Holy Spirit and spoke with wisdom. This was a **fulfillment** of what Jesus had promised in Luke 21:15: *I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist*.

Because the Freedmen were unable to win their argument with Stephen, they secretly bribed some men to falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God.

The accusers stirred up the *elders*, the *scribes*, and the *people*. This is the first record of the common people becoming **hostile** toward the disciples. Because of the uprising, the authorities arrested Stephen and took him before the council (Sanhedrin). This is the

third time followers of Jesus were taken before the highest Jewish court.

The witnesses probably did not **fabricate** the charges against Stephen. It is more likely that they **maliciously** twisted the truth he had spoken. They charged him with speaking blasphemous words against the temple (holy place) and the law. They falsely claimed they had heard him say that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the Mosaic law. When Stephen defends himself, it was clear that he did support the law of Moses. In his speech, he did not speak against the temple. He merely showed that God was not confined to an earthly, man-made temple.

As the charges were made against Stephen, every council member was looking at him directly and could see that he had *the face of an angel*. This is a common phrase used in Jewish writings to express deep feeling, sincerity, and confidence in God (Barnes' Notes on the New Testament).

II. Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin - Acts 7:1-53

When asked if he was guilty, Stephen did not answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Instead, his answer gave proof that he knew, loved, and cherished the Old Testament scriptures. His words showed that he believed in Moses and God's authority of the law which was delivered through Moses (7:38).

Stephen began his defense by calling the council his *brethren and fathers* and referring to Abraham as *our father* (7:2). He was showing them that they had God's covenant and the inheritance from God in common with each other. Stephen then pointed out that the people of Israel had a history of rejecting God's leaders. They had rejected Joseph (7:9-16), Moses (7:27-35), and the prophets (7:52). Moses had predicted the coming of a Prophet greater than himself and commanded the Jews to listen to Him (7:37). Stephen had listened. His accusers had not. They were

the ones who had rejected God's law, God's leaders, and the Just One (7:52). Stephen reminded the council of these things with a review of history.

Abraham was called by God from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8), *this land in which you now dwell* (7:4). Obediently, Abraham followed God to the new land. He did not get ownership of the land, but knew it was promised to his descendants by God. That is why it is called the 'promised land.' His descendants did not receive the land right away. According to God's words (7:6-7), they first spent 400 years in captivity in Egypt.

God had promised Abraham that He would give the land to his descendants for an everlasting possession. The sign of the covenant, which Abraham and his descendants were to keep, was circumcision. Every male child among you shall be circumcised (Genesis 17:10). The covenant was kept as Abraham was blessed with twelve great-grandsons, the twelve **patriarchs** (7:8) of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The patriarchs rejected their brother Joseph and sold him into Egypt. God was with Joseph and accomplished His purposes as a result of their evil act. He made Joseph governor over Egypt. God used Joseph to save his father, Jacob, and his entire family from starvation when a famine spread throughout the land of Canaan. Stephen noted in his speech that even though the patriarchs had gone to live in Egypt, they still insisted on being buried in the promised land.

NOTE: Jacob's body was taken from Egypt to the promised land for burial (Genesis 49:29-33 and 50:12). Although Joseph was originally buried in Egypt (Genesis 50:26), his bones were carried back to the promised land by Moses (Exodus 13:19) and buried in Shechem by Joshua (Joshua 24:32).

God had been with His people while they were in Egypt and they had multiplied. Then the

king who had known Joseph died and another king with a different character took his place. He did not know the history of all that Joseph had done. He mistreated the children of Israel and ordered that their infants be put to death. It was into this environment that Moses was born. Moses was well-pleasing to God.

By faith, Moses' parents defied the king and raised Moses in their home until he was three months old (Hebrews 11:23). When he could no longer be hidden, he was put in a basket and placed in the Nile River (Exodus 2:5). There, he was found by Pharaoh's daughter who took him and raised him as her son. Can you imagine how scary it would be to hide a newborn baby. Babies cry! Moses' family feared for their lives every minute of each day that they hid the baby, but they had something even stronger than their fear...FAITH.

At the age of 40, Moses' heart was moved to leave the Pharaoh's palace and visit his own people, the children of Israel. When he saw a fellow Israelite being mistreated by an Egyptian, he struck the Egyptian and killed him. The following day Moses came upon two Israelites fighting and tried to resolve the conflict between them but they rejected him. They had heard about Moses' killing the Egyptian and they did not like Moses trying to be ruler and a judge over them. Moses thought that his brethren would understand that God would deliver them by using him, but they did not understand (7:25).

When Moses realized that people knew he had killed the Egyptian, he was afraid and fled to Midian. There he married and God blessed him with two sons. He lived in Midian forty years. Then, God spoke to him. He told Moses that He was going to send him to Egypt to deliver the people of Israel from their oppression.

The one who had been rejected by his people because they thought he was trying to be a *ruler and a judge* (7:27) was now made a *ruler and a deliverer* by God. The word

"deliverer" here is the Greek word which means "a redeemer," or "one who releases." Moses redeemed his people, releasing them from slavery, performing signs and wonders in Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, and living for forty years in the wilderness. As a redeemer, Moses pointed to a greater Prophet to come, the Lord Jesus Christ. Moses' instructions to the people were to *hear Him*.

Stephen referred to God's laws as *living oracles*. They were "oracles" because they were inspired and revealed by God, and they were "living" because the power of God was in them (Hebrews 4:12). Moses received the written law from God on Mt. Sinai and delivered it to the people of Israel. They rejected the law, their hearts turned back to Egypt, they called Aaron, Moses' brother) to make hand-made gods, and he made a golden calf. They sacrificed to the idol and rejoiced in the works of their hands, rather than in the laws of God.

Because the people rejected true worship and turned to idols, God allowed them to go their own way. The answer to the question of the prophets (Amos 5:25) in verse 42 is "no." Israel did not sacrifice to God during the forty years in the wilderness. They did worship Moloch, an Ammonite god, which is specifically forbidden in Leviticus 18:21. They did worship Remphan, a pagan god associated with the stars. As predicted, God judged them and carried them away beyond Babylon.

Stephen went on to speak about the tabernacle in the wilderness. He showed that Israel placed great importance upon their temple and took great pride in it. However, God did not live there! God gave Moses the pattern for the tabernacle in the wilderness. It was a *tabernacle of witness* because it witnessed that God's presence was with His people (Exodus 25:9; 40; 26:30; 27:8). Moses constructed the tabernacle and it was carried with the nation throughout their wilderness wanderings. After Moses' death, Joshua's generation carried the tabernacle into the promised land.

Because the tabernacle was only a portable tent, King David desired to build a permanent house for God (2 Samuel 7:2), but God refused. David's son, Solomon, built a temple for God. Remember, however, that Stephen pointed out that God does not dwell in temples made with hands. The temple, like the tabernacle, was only a symbol of God's presence and not a house for God to live in. Stephen remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, that heaven was God's throne and the earth His footstool. God had made all things, so who could make a house for Him to dwell in? (Isaiah 66:1 as quoted in Acts 7:49-50).

The simple fact is that God does not dwell in buildings made by men. Solomon had recognized that and said, *Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built* (1 Kings 8:27).

At this point in his speech, Stephen turned upon the men of the Sanhedrin with strong accusations. He said to them, *You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears* (7:51a). These are the exact words God Himself had used in speaking of His people. (See Exodus 33:3; Leviticus 26:41; Jeremiah 6:10.) They were *stiffnecked*, or spiritually stubborn, refusing to turn and go God's way. Their uncircumcised hearts meant that they were not true believers because there was no sign of repentance and openness to God. Their uncircumcised ears did not listen to God and did not delight in His word.

The Holy Spirit had been speaking to the council as Stephen spoke, but they were resistant. The word "resist" which Stephen used is a very strong word which means "active resistance." They were willfully refusing to accept the Holy Spirit's witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. They had been presented with solid evidence that Jesus Christ was their Messiah, but they did not want to give in to what they knew was true in their heart. Do you know any people who are like that today?

Their fathers had persecuted the prophets. They had killed those who had foretold the coming of the *Just One*, the Lord Jesus Christ, their Messiah. Now, this generation of Jews had betrayed and murdered Him.

The giving of the law at Mt. Sinai was a solemn occasion when God spoke directly to the people (Exodus 20:1) in the midst of thunder, lightning flashes, trumpet sound, smoke (Exodus 20:18), and the attendant host of angels (Deuteronomy 33:2 and Galatians 3:19). In spite of the majesty of the law and the magnificent and memorable way it was given, these men of Israel had not kept it. †

Prayer

Ask God to help you love His word so much that you read it often and use it in your life.

Memory Verse

Luke 21:15 *I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.*

Vocabulary

synagogue - made up of 10 or more Jews who met together to read and interpret Scripture. There may have been hundreds of synagogues in Jerusalem during the first century.

fulfillment - to satisfy; to complete

hostile - feeling or showing ill will

fabricate - create in order to deceive

maliciously - harmfully

patriarch - man who rules family, tribe, or clan

QUESTIONS FOR ACTS LESSON 6

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Review last week's lesson and notes.

1. What did you like best about Stephen?

2. What was the most important thing you learned from Stephen's speech?

DAY TWO: Read Acts 7:54-8:4.

3. a. How did the Council respond to Stephen's speech?

- b. What was Stephen's reaction?

- c. What did the Council do in response to this?

- d. Using Leviticus 24:16, give a reason for the Council's reaction.

4. a. Who watched the clothing of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen and, according to Acts 8:1, what did this indicate?

- b. ? (Thought Question) What other name was this man known by, and what else do you know about him?

5. What happened to the church at Jerusalem after Stephen was stoned?

DAY THREE: Read Acts 8:4-13.

6. a. Fill in the blank. Philip went to _____ to preach.

- b. What do you learn about this place from
2 Kings 17:23-29 and 41?

John 4:9?

Acts 1:8?

c. What else did Philip do besides preach?

d. How did the people of the city respond:
in verse 6?

in verse 8?

in verse 12?

7. Which person from Samaria is mentioned by name, and what do you learn about him?

DAY FOUR: Read Acts 8:14-25.

8. a. After this, who else went to Samaria and why did they go?

b. What did they do, and what was the result?

9. What did Simon want?

10. Give one point from each verse below from Peter's response to Simon.

verse 20 _____

verse 21 _____

verse 22 _____

verse 23 _____

11. a. What did Simon ask for? _____

b. ? (Thought Question) What do you think of his request?

DAY FIVE: Read Acts 8:26-40.

12. Give the verse which corresponds to each statement below concerning Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Correct any errors in the statements.

vs. _____ An angel spoke to Philip, telling him to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.

vs. _____ Philip complained, arose and went.

vs. _____ The Ethiopian eunuch was in charge of the treasury of Queen Candace.

vs. _____ The Ethiopian eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship.

vs. _____ The angel told Philip to go and overtake the chariot.

vs. _____ Philip ran to the Ethiopian eunuch and heard him reading from the Scriptures.

vs. _____ Philip asked if he understood what he was reading and the eunuch said, "Of course."

13. a. What Scripture passage was the Ethiopian eunuch reading when Philip found him? (Look in the margin of your Bible to find the answer.)

b. ? (Thought Question) Who was the passage talking about? Give reasons for your answer.

14. What happened to Philip after his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch?

15. ♥ (Heart Question) Please share something good that has happened to you as a result of obeying God?