

THE ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 6:1 – 8:3 A great persecution begins

*How did the Jerusalem church solve a food serving problem?

*Why was Stephen stoned?

*Who was Saul?

Acts 6:1-4 A complaint about food

Remember to read the text in the Bible yourself as you look over this material. That way, you can find some points and applications that make even more sense to you personally.

Recall that the disciples had been sharing their possessions with those among them in need (Acts 4:34-35). One example of this is that they would distribute food to the poor Christians. However, as the church in Jerusalem was still growing larger and larger, a problem arose in the administering of the food. One group in particular, the Hellenistic Jews, complained that their widows weren't getting their fair share. (The Hellenists were Jews that had accepted Greek culture; they spoke Greek and mostly came from outside Judea.)

So the apostles gathered everyone together and gave some advice: the twelve themselves would not be the ones to manage the serving of food, since it would distract them from the mission God had given them, but rather, the church was to choose seven qualified men to do the job.

Note: Devoted to prayer

The apostles show us how much priority we must give to prayer. They turned down a task because they needed to spend their time in prayer. We often complain that we are too busy to pray, and it is true that we have full schedules. But if we can make room on our "to-do lists" for work, chores, and recreation, then prayer must be there also. It is so important that Jesus woke up before sunrise after a long night in order to spend time alone talking with the Father in heaven (Mark 1:32-35). We need to follow these examples.

Acts 6:5-7 The solution

As mandated, the church chose seven men. The apostles gave their stamp of approval and showed that they were giving the seven men authority to perform the task by laying their hands on them. As these things happened, the gospel message kept on spreading through Jerusalem, so much that even many of the ministers of the Jewish faith, the priests, became obedient to the faith.

Note: Cooperation leads to unity

Each of the seven men mentioned in verse 5 had a Greek name. They were probably, therefore, Hellenistic Jews. What does that mean? It means that the non-Hellenistic Jews were willing to allow the Hellenists to oversee the daily food serving. It was a gesture of goodwill, since they wanted to ensure that the Hellenistic widows received their food, and also a gesture of trust, since their own widows were now open to being neglected. This is just one more example of how openness, trust, and cooperation among brothers in Christ leads to unity.

Acts 6:8-15 Stephen is put on trial

One of the seven servants chosen was named Stephen. This man had great faith, and the Holy Spirit helped him to do great miracles. However, some Jews from a certain synagogue tried to argue with Stephen about what he was teaching. Yet, since they were debating with someone whom the Holy Spirit of God inspired with wisdom, they came out looking foolish. Instead of being humble to accept the truth, they decided to try a different method to deal with Stephen: eliminate him. So they got some men to say that Stephen had blasphemed, a charge which aroused the anger of many other Jews. So a crowd dragged Stephen before the Jewish Council, and false witnesses misrepresented his teachings to make it sound like he had blasphemed. Stephen's face remained calm and confident throughout all of this.

Acts 7:1-53 Stephen responds to the Council

Finally, the high priest gave Stephen an opportunity to make a defense against the accusations. But instead of trying to deflect the charges against him, Stephen began a speech that would eventually convict the Jews of their own sin. Stephen states his points in the conclusion to his message: the Jews were resisting the Holy Spirit just like their ancestors, they betrayed and murdered the Messiah, and they did not keep the law that God sent to them. He made his points by comparing the Jews to their forefathers, the Israelites of old, who, time and time again throughout their history, had rebelled against God.

The Jews were immensely proud of their heritage, and claimed to behave as their fathers (see John 8:39). Ironically, it is this very fact that showed their guilt. Notice some of the specific examples from Israelite history that Stephen used to prove his points:

- *“You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did”*

God had promised to the father of the Israelites, Abraham, that He would give the land of Canaan to his descendants (verse 5), and even that He would rescue them from slavery in Egypt in order to bring them there (verses 6 and 7). However, the Israelites, by constant rebellion against God, resisted the gracious gift of the promised land, to the point where they “in their hearts turned back to Egypt” (verse 39). Just like the Israelites of old, the Jews of Stephen's time were rejecting God's gifts.

- *“You have now become betrayers and murderers of the Righteous One.”*

The most gracious gift that the Jews resisted was Jesus Christ Himself, the Messiah. Many prophets had announced His coming. For instance, Moses spoke to the Israelites about Him, saying, “God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren” (verse 37). Jesus was just like Moses in many ways; he was “both a ruler and a deliverer” (verse 35) for the people. But also just like Moses, Jesus was rejected and disowned, though He was sent by God.

- *“You received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”*

While the Israelites were encamped around Mount Sinai in the wilderness, Moses was on the mountain and an angel was speaking to him. He received a Law from God to give to the people (verse 38). Yet only a few days after the Israelites heard the commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exodus 20:4) and had agreed to keep it, they were already breaking God's law! They made a golden calf and worshiped it (verses 40-41). They enjoyed doing things their own way more than God's way, and “were rejoicing the works of their hands.” In the same way, the Jews of the New Testament heard the gospel through God's messengers, but did not accept it. They would rather do things their own way! They were doing the exact thing they accused Stephen of (see 6:13-14): they rejected God's law! They stoned God's messenger, Stephen, just as their fathers had persecuted the prophets.

Note: Do we learn from past mistakes?

When we do something wrong, do we learn not to do it again? How about when we see others doing wrong? Let us learn from past mistakes of ourselves and

others, especially the ones that the Bible shows us (see Romans 15:4). This way, we can be sure we will not be hard-hearted to reject Christ like those who have gone before us.

Acts 7:54-60 Stephen is stoned

Just like the message on the first day, this message pierced straight to the hearts of the listeners (see Acts 2:37). But this audience, instead of asking how to change, gnashed their teeth at Stephen like a pack of snarling wolves. Stephen, however, was engrossed in a different sight. He saw something that few men have seen while on earth: the glory of God. And Jesus was standing right next to Him!

It would be Stephen's last sight. When the Council heard Stephen describe his vision, together they shouted and covered their ears and dragged him out of the city. There they stoned him — they threw rocks at him until he died. But even while Stephen was suffering this slow and painful execution, he kept calling on Jesus. And just like Jesus did while He was on the cross, Stephen begged God to forgive the sin of the people who were killing him.

Note: “Standing at the right hand of God”

When Jesus ascended into heaven after accomplishing His mission on earth, the Bible says that He was exalted to the right hand of God, the symbolic position of highest honor (see Acts 2:33-35). There Jesus sat down, having finished His work (see Hebrews 10:11-13). But here, Stephen saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. This teaches us that, while Jesus has finished all He needed to do on earth, He is still active among His people as He reigns in heaven. Jesus is alive and working today!

Acts 8:1-3 A great persecution begins

In these verses we are introduced to a young man named Saul. Take note of what kind of person he was. He was a Jew who agreed wholeheartedly with the decision to stone Stephen, and even helped those who executed him by holding their coats (7:58). He was so zealous for his own beliefs that he tried to extinguish belief in Christ. He would raid the houses of the disciples and put men and women alike in jail. We'll see more about Saul soon.

But Saul was not the only one who got involved in persecuting the believers. A great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, so that all the disciples — apart from the apostles — had to scatter throughout the surrounding regions. This is a far cry from where we left the church at the end of last lesson! (see Acts 5:14-16). How will the disciples respond to this challenge? We'll see in the next lesson that they use it as a blessing.

Choose the right answer:

- ___ 1. What group within the church complained that their widows were being neglected in the food serving? a) the native Hebrews, b) the Hellenistic Jews, c) the proselytes, or d) the Pharisees.
- ___ 2. Which of these men was NOT one of the seven put in charge of the daily food serving? a) Stephen, b) Saul, or c) Phillip.
- ___ 3. Which of these Old Testament characters did Stephen NOT mention in his speech? a) Abraham, b) Joseph, c) Moses, or d) Noah.
- ___ 4. What did Stephen see Jesus doing at God's right hand in his vision? a) sitting, b) standing, c) kneeling, or d) exercising.
- ___ 5. How did the Jews react when they heard Stephen describe his vision? a) they looked up to the heavens, b) they prophesied, c) they quoted Scripture to Stephen, or d) they covered their ears.
- ___ 6. Who would drag believers out of their homes and put them in jail? a) Saul, b) Ananias, c) Gamaliel, or d) Barnabas.

True or false:

- ___ 1. The apostles refused to allow others to oversee the daily food serving.

- ___ 2. Some Jews accused Stephen of speaking against the temple and the Law of Moses.
- ___ 3. Stephen made the point in his message by comparing the Jews to their forefathers in Israelite history.
- ___ 4. Like the people on the day of Pentecost, the Jews were “cut in their hearts” by the message.
- ___ 5. Like the people on the day of Pentecost, the Jews repented and turned to Christ.
- ___ 6. Before he breathed his last, Stephen called down curses on those who stoned him.
- ___ 7. The disciples decided to stay in Jerusalem despite the great persecution.

After you've filled out the answers, send this lesson back to the person who sent it to you with your name and address. They will correct your answers and discuss any questions or comments you have on the text.

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