

### *Stephen's Witness and Death*

At this point in the book of Acts the Jerusalem church is well established. Being comprised primarily of Jews and restricted to Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit is about to scatter His people abroad—out into the wider world. In the next several chapters, Luke explains how the foundations of the Gentile mission were laid—through Stephen the martyr and Philip the evangelist.

1. Who are some contemporary heroes of the faith that spur you on to a deeper commitment? What about their life is inspiring to you?

***Bow in Prayer:*** “Dearest Father, help us to remember that the Holy Spirit is the Workman who is molding us into the image of Jesus Christ. May we look forward with anticipation to the completed work the Holy Spirit will one day finish in us!”

***Read*** Acts 6:1-7 for background on the larger passage we are studying this week (Acts 6:1-8:1).

Many Jews immigrated to Jerusalem to spend their final years in the Holy city and die there. Often the men preceded their wives in death, and widows were then left with no immediate family to support them. Jerusalem was both a deeply traditional culture and a cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world. The new Christian community consisted of native Hebrews and Hellenistic or Grecian Jews. The native Hebrews spoke Aramaic and were those who had been born and raised in the land of Israel. The Grecian Jews were those from other parts of the Roman Empire who were immigrants and members of the minority. It is in this environment that the situation in chapter 6 unfolds.

2.
  - a. What genuine problem arose between the Greek-speaking disciples and those who spoke Aramaic?
  - b. What contributing factor does Luke draw our attention to in Acts 6:1a?
  - c. What system for mutual provision had already been established in the church (Acts 2:44-45)?

The solution was as bold as the problem was serious.

3. a. How did the apostles approach this internal issue and what solution was suggested and agreed upon?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. What specific qualifications were necessary for the seven men (6:3); and how were they commissioned for their new responsibility (6:6)?

The ministry of the “seven godly men” was an extension of Jesus’ ministry of mercy to those in the flock who were weak and helpless. It is interesting that none of the seven men had Hebrew names; they were all Greek-speaking Jews, except for Nicolas who was a Gentile convert.

4. What remarkable results of the reorganization are noted by Luke in Acts 6:7? What religious group was reached? What had been their response until now? (See Acts 4:1-2 and 5:17.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What principles can be gleaned from this passage that will help you become a more effective member of your church?

Thoughtfully *read* Acts 6:8-15.

6. Besides caring for the Grecian widows in the church, what special events marked Stephen’s ministry (6:8)?

When Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, begins to challenge the long held traditions and beliefs by preaching that the Law is only a stepping stone to the person and message of Jesus Christ and that God cannot be confined to a temple made with hands, they get more than a little upset!

7. a. Which provinces in the Roman Empire do Stephen's opponents represent?
  
- b. Describe Stephen, using the information about him in verses 5, 8, 10 and 15.
  
- c. Now describe him as his opponents were portraying him.

After the false witnesses had finished twisting Stephen's teaching, everyone turned to Stephen for his reaction. *They found his face shining as bright as an angel's!*

8. What meaning do you attach to the dramatic change in Stephen's physical appearance? (Look at Exodus 34:29-30.)

*After that—the Jewish council gave Stephen a chance to speak in his defense by asking him, "Are these accusations true?"*

### ***Stephen Answers the Sanhedrin***

Standing before the hostile Jewish Council with the angry eyes of Israel's most influential and powerful religious leaders focused on him—what would he say? He made the most of the moment! Rather than responding to the charges directly, Stephen responded subtly, but forcefully, through the indirect route of *insinuation*. He selectively recounted Israelite history in such a way as to draw attention to the Jews' misunderstanding of their own history. ***Woven throughout his address are three main points:*** God has never confined Himself to one place (like the temple, or the land of Israel); though the Jewish people had been entrusted with God's law they often disregarded it; the Jewish people had repeatedly rejected and persecuted God's prophets and chosen ones.

Now, ***read*** Stephen's entire address in Acts 7:1-53 from your favorite translation.

9. Record below how Stephen demonstrates his three main points through the lives of the patriarchs; *Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David/Solomon.*  
***Abraham***—Acts 7:2-8

*Joseph*—Acts 7:9-16

*Moses*—Acts 7:17-43

*David/Solomon*—Acts 7:44-53

There is a lesson for us in Stephen's sermon on how we use and interpret Scripture. The Jews often focused on the obscure points of the Law while overlooking the plain truth of Scripture. This practice resulted in the misinterpretation of God's Word and the rejection of their Messiah! ***Spend a few moments reflecting on the importance of rightly handling the Word of God, as well as the consequences of mishandling it.***

10. Contemplate Stephen's words in Acts 7:51. How have you been resistant to the Holy Spirit's work in your life this week?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. How will you begin to bow to God in that area now?

### ***Life Lesson***

Stephen knew the story of God's work among his people very well. Not only was he able to tell the story, but he was able to punctuate it with numerous key verses that he knew by heart. How well do you know the biblical story of salvation? How many of the key verses do you have at your fingertips, able to recite?

12. Were you convicted by Stephen's example? Write a letter to God on a separate sheet of paper. Talk to Him about areas in your life and witness where you feel challenged—where you need His strength and grace. *Pray that the Holy Spirit will impress deeply on your heart and mind the truth of the Gospel through studying and committing His Word to memory.*

As this story unfolds, Stephen's opponents become so enraged they can no longer be restrained. **Read** Acts 7:54-8:1. (In verse 57 "rushed at him" (NIV) uses the Greek word *hormao*. This is the same word used to describe the mad rush of the herd of swine into the sea in Mark 5:13.) This was an out-of-control mob rushing at Stephen.

13. At the very same moment, what was Stephen experiencing (Acts 7:55, 59, 60)?

14. As Stephen died he spoke words reminiscent of Jesus' words on the cross. Compare Luke 23:34, 46 with Acts 7:59-60. Note the similarities.

This is the first record of the appearance of the resurrected Christ since His ascension in Acts 1. In this scene, as the church experiences the first (of many) who will die for their faith, Luke wants his readers to know that martyrs do not die alone—out of the gaze of their Savior. Christ was not only present at the right hand of the Father; He was *standing* to receive His faithful servant home.

15. What relevant facts does Luke introduce into the narrative in a subtle way? (See Acts 7:57c and 8:1a.) Explain their significance.

16. What happened in Jerusalem immediately after Stephen's death (8:1)? How do these events help fulfill the promise of Acts 1:8?

17. *Stephen had obviously learned from his Master some important lessons about how to live and how to die.* What did Stephen's short, but strategic life in this world teach you about living? About dying?