

Acts Chapters 6-7

Welcome back to our Monday Night Bible Study. For perhaps the only time in our Acts Series, we will cover two entire chapters – including a sixty-verse Chapter 7. As always, it is a privilege to study God’s Word with you! So, let’s pray and dive right in!

Seven Chosen to Serve

Acts 6:1-7

6 In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. ² The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, “It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. ⁶ They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

This is an amazing account in Scripture. There was a likely distinction between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews based primarily on language issues and expansion issues. In other words, the Early Church grew at such a rate that communication and distribution of the daily charitable giving were impacted. In this culture, provision for women was largely tied to family lineage and widows could go in need without familial support. I see nothing in the Scriptural context here that suggests this was intentional; rather, it is more likely due to the huge number of converts within the Hellenistic community and growing needs within it.

We see here several important facets of the Early Church which I believe are still God's plan for the church today (I believe the Book of Acts is both descriptive of the Early Church and prescriptive for today's Church):

- 1) The primary responsibilities for pastors are to devote ourselves to prayer and to relate the Word of God to the People of God. This is a foreign concept in today's Western Church where pastors are expected to be therapists, managers, business-minded professionals, and accountants. But this is not the way it always was. Instead, "Every pastor is responsible for communicating Christ and for ministering God's Word, at all times, to everyone,

and in many ways” (Vanhoozer and Strachan). The Twelve knew this to be true – they were not being lazy here – and they *delegated* the administrative tasks of the Church to the *people of the Church* just as Moses once did after receiving sage advice from his father-in-law. Remember, the Church is both an organization with administrative needs and an organism (a living Body), so this means that we should always make strategic changes asking if what we are doing is biblical, and if it is biblical, is it currently wise? If we would just prayerfully ask these questions, it would alleviate a *whole* lot of problems in the Church!

- 2) The qualifications for the deacons were to be full of the Holy Spirit and to have great wisdom. This is still necessary today, but again in the Western Church we find many leaders chosen for their business acumen rather than their Spirit-filled servant-heartedness. Other reasons for so many disputes in Church Bodies today are that pastors are not theologically leading through the power of the Spirit, and that deacons (or the equivalent role based on the denomination one belongs to) are not Spirit-filled servants.
- 3) Apostolic leadership *confirmed* the choices the *people* made. There was a clear delineation of authority in that the Apostles (and later Elders) were responsible for the confirmation of the chosen seven. More importantly than even this fact, the Holy Spirit apparently

affirmed the seven men – and that is especially noteworthy in Stephen and, later, in Phillip.

- 4) The obedience of *everyone* involved is evident: the distribution issue was resolved; church leadership roles were established; the Word of God spread; people were converted and added to the Church; and even a large group of Priests accepted The Way of Christ. And, as usual when a Church is thriving, the enemy of God revolts against that Church. And we will see it happen here:

Stephen Accused of Blasphemy

Acts 6:8-15

⁸ Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from some members of the Freedmen's Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, and they began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to stand up against his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came, seized him, and took him to the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They also presented false witnesses who said, "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and the

law. ¹⁴ For we heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.” ¹⁵ And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Much like the Apostles before him, Stephen was obedient *to* the Spirit and great power was given to him *by* the Spirit to accomplish miracles and wonders in the grace of Jesus Christ, and implicitly, through His Great Name. Just as the Apostles were opposed by evil and jealous men, several groups of men arose against the Spirit-fill and -empowered Stephen. You see, Stephen did more than say he was devoted to Jesus Christ, he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to work as Jesus worked; he was given wisdom through the Spirit as Jesus was; he went through a trial in front of evil men just as Jesus did; he preached the Old Testament like Jesus did; and he died at the hands of a mob like Jesus did. Stephen was a man who needed saving *by* Jesus just as we did and do, but when Stephen said he would follow Jesus, he apparently did so with all the costs of discipleship in mind and heart.

The opponents of Stephen came from different groups of Jews, and when they could not overcome the works done through him or combat the wisdom given to him by the Spirit, they did what powerless bullies often do when they cannot get their way – they took him to a bigger

group of bullies with authority to get something done by lying to the Sanhedrin in the process.

Stephen, conversely, was serene and innocent. Whether there was a literal glowing appearance – such as that of Moses when he was in God’s presence (Exodus 34:29-35) – or whether Luke was describing Stephen’s Spirit-calmed countenance is a matter of interpretation, but in any case, it was physically evident that Stephen knew the Lord. Is it not amazing that Stephen’s opponents accused him of demeaning Moses when God showed him the same favor that He had shown Moses?!

What a lesson to us: We must allow God to be our defense when we are falsely accused! As David prayed, “May lying lips be silenced – lips that speak defiantly against the innocent with arrogance and contempt. How great is your favor, which you store up for your loyal followers. In plain sight of everyone you bestow it on those who take shelter in you” (Psalm 31: New English Translation).

Stephen’s Sermon

Acts 7:1-8

7 “Are these things true?” the high priest asked.

² “Brothers and fathers,” he replied, “listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in

Haran, ³ and said to him: **Leave your country and relatives, and come to the land that I will show you.**^[a]

⁴“Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this land in which you are now living. ⁵He didn’t give him an inheritance in it—not even a foot of ground—but he promised to give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him, even though he was childless. ⁶God spoke in this way: His **descendants would be strangers in a foreign country, and they would enslave and oppress them for four hundred years.** ⁷**I will judge the nation that they will serve as slaves, God said. After this, they will come out and worship me in this place.**^[b] ⁸ And so he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. After this, he fathered Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

The High Priest asked Stephen a simple question: “Are these things true?” Stephen, like any good Spirit-filled preacher, gave a lengthy answer beginning with the call to Abraham (or Abram at the time of his calling). This is not a coincidence – the Spirit-filled Stephen started at the *beginning* of the Nation of Israel given that he was being accused of heresy and sedition against Moses and, by extension, The Law.

Now, Abraham responded to a difficult call to leave his own land to go to a land *of promise* (not *fulfillment* in his *own* lifetime). He did this by

faith, obeying God's words. Let's look at this: "The LORD said to Abram, 'Go out from your land and your relatives to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you'" (Genesis 12:1-3).

We know now, as Stephen knew then, that Abraham lived by faith. "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and set out for a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, coheirs of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10).

It seems to me that Stephen, through the Holy Spirit, was contrasting the Sanhedrin leaders' *lack* of faith and their *lack of understanding* of the Messianic Promise to the Church's understanding by beginning with the Abrahamic Covenant, *from whom would come the Christ* (Matthew 1:1-3). Suffering, which these men were certainly unwilling to do, would follow the family of Abraham. His descendants would suffer later in Egypt before learning to truly follow and worship God. Stephen, apparently with this in mind, continued his historical account of the Israelites walk with their God:

The Patriarchs in Egypt

Acts 7:9-16

⁹“The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt, but God was with him ¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his troubles. He gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over his whole household. ¹¹ Now a famine and great suffering came over all of Egypt and Canaan, and our ancestors could find no food. ¹² When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there the first time. ¹³ The second time, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. ¹⁴ Joseph invited his father Jacob and all his relatives, seventy-five people in all, ¹⁵ and Jacob went down to Egypt. He and our ancestors died there, ¹⁶ were carried back to Shechem, and were placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Having mentioned the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, Stephen explained how they got to Egypt in the first place by describing the betrayal of Joseph’s brothers and the plan of God to deliver him, and by extension, his family due to the Abrahamic Covenant. God was with Joseph due to *God’s* own favor. Unsaid here, but true, is the weaving of Jesus into the Israelite fabric of covenant. Now Stephen was finally getting to the false accusations made against him regarding Moses:

Moses, a Rejected Savior

Acts 7:17-36

¹⁷ “As the time was approaching to fulfill the promise that God had made to Abraham, the people flourished and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until a different king who did not know Joseph ruled over Egypt.^[c] ¹⁹ He dealt deceitfully with our race and oppressed our ancestors by making them abandon their infants outside so that they wouldn’t survive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God’s sight. He was cared for in his father’s home for three months. ²¹ When he was put outside, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted and raised him as her own son. ²² So Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his speech and actions.

²³ “When he was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. ²⁴ When he saw one of them being mistreated, he came to his rescue and avenged the oppressed man by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ He assumed his people would understand that God would give them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. ²⁶ The next day he showed up while they were fighting and tried to reconcile them peacefully, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why are you mistreating each other?’

²⁷ “But the one who was mistreating his neighbor pushed Moses aside, saying: **Who appointed you a ruler and a judge over us?** ²⁸ **Do you want to kill me, the same way you killed the Egyptian yesterday?**^[d]

²⁹ “When he heard this, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons. ³⁰ After forty years had passed, an angel^[e] appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he was approaching to look at it, the voice of the Lord came: ³² **I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.**^[f] Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look.

³³ “The Lord said to him: **Take off the sandals from your feet, because the place where you are standing is holy ground.** ³⁴ **I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt.**^[g]

³⁵ “This Moses, whom they rejected when they said, **Who appointed you a ruler and a judge?**^[h]—this one God sent as a ruler and a deliverer through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ This man led them out and performed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years.

Stephen portrayed to the Sanhedrin the account of Moses, reminding these leaders of the faithfulness of God even while His People were suffering in Egypt (they multiplied greatly), and then he reminded them that the one called by God, Moses, was rejected by his *own* people.

This is important – the Holy Spirit, through His servant Stephen, was setting the story to relate this rejection of Moses to the Sanhedrin’s rejection of the Christ. So, too, did Stephen note the obedience of Moses to the call (see Hebrews 11:23-26), “...For he considered reproach for the sake of Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since he was looking ahead to the reward.” Moses was awaiting the coming Christ – the Messiah – and Moses’s obedience was tied to this truth through the words of Stephen and the words of the writer of Hebrews. Through the power of the same God, Moses performed signs and miracles among the disbelieving Israelites, just as the Sanhedrin and their followers would casually dismiss the miracles of God performed through the Apostles and through Stephen.

At this point in the conversation, Stephen begins to note the rebellion of Israel against their God:

Acts 7:37-43

Israel’s Rebellion against God

³⁷ “This is the Moses who said to the Israelites: **God^[i] will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers.^[i]** ³⁸ He is the one who was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors. He received living oracles to give to us. ³⁹ Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him. Instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰ They told Aaron: **Make us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we don’t know what’s happened to him.^[k]** ⁴¹ They even made a calf in those days, offered sacrifice to the idol, and were celebrating what their hands had made. ⁴² God turned away and gave them up to worship the stars of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

House of Israel, did you bring me offerings and sacrifices for forty years in the wilderness?

⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship.

So I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.^[i]

During the Exodus from the land of Egypt, the Israelites sinned greatly against God due to their lack of obedience; their desire for what they had left behind (astounding as that is!); and their impatience when Moses was away on the mountain meeting with God. How *quickly* they rebelled

and made idols with their own hands! How *quickly* they turned from the God who delivered them. Their own rebellion led to their later exile into Babylon. Stephen referenced Amos 5:25-27, noting the false worship of the *former* Israelites and again setting up a comparison to the *current* Israelite leaders:

God's Real Tabernacle

Acts 7:44-50

⁴⁴ “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the testimony in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses commanded him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our ancestors in turn received it and with Joshua brought it in when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before them, until the days of David. ⁴⁶ He found favor in God's sight and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God^[m] of Jacob. ⁴⁷ It was Solomon, rather, who built him a house, ⁴⁸ but the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands, as the prophet says:

⁴⁹ **Heaven is my throne,
and the earth my footstool.**

**What sort of house will you build for me?
says the Lord,
or what will be my resting place?**

⁵⁰ **Did not my hand make all these things?**^[n]

Stephen then spoke of The Law – the Oracles of God – and how God granted His People the Land of Promise, all the way to the time of David and Solomon, who build a House of Worship for God. Implicit within this statement is the eternal Davidic Covenant regarding the promised Christ, in addition to the truth that while God *allowed* Solomon to build Him a house, there is *no* true house that can contain the God who created all things.

As Merida notes, “God appeared. God spoke. God sent. God promised. God punished. God rescued. God is working out his sovereign will all over the earth. He most certainly is not confined to a building.”

At this point in the account, Stephen becomes much more direct:

Resisting the Holy Spirit

Acts 7:51-53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your ancestors did, you do also. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They even killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. ⁵³ You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.”

Finally, the Spirit-filled Stephen took a tone that is reminiscent of the Old Testament Prophets and of Jesus too, telling these men who rejected the will of the Holy Spirit "...that they are just like their stubborn, hard-hearted father who rejected God's Word. Like them, they are rejecting God's gracious appeals" by rejecting Jesus and those He sent to them. He then reminds them that their ancestors killed the prophets who *foretold* of Jesus ("the Righteous One").

Jesus, earlier, said something similar too regarding these supposed leaders of Israel: "Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell? This is why I am sending you prophets, sages, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify and some of them you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. So all the righteous blood shed on the earth will be charged to you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you all these things will come on this generation" (Matthew 23:33-36).

And, here in Acts 7, we will see such innocent blood shed *just as Jesus foretold*:

The First Christian Martyr

Acts 7:54-60

⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were enraged^[o] and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ He said, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

⁵⁷ They yelled at the top of their voices, covered their ears, and together rushed against him. ⁵⁸ They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And after saying this, he fell asleep.

Stephen, though indignant at the response of the Sanhedrin to the call of Christ, *still* had love in his heart for both His Savior *and* for the people who rejected Him. Oh, to see Jesus the way Stephen did – in His glory...the way Paul eventually did after much suffering. Oh, to love Christ and people the way that Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr, did. What an *example* Stephen left us, and we will later observe *many* Christians who also gave their lives for Jesus:P

There was Ignatius, who said, “I am God’s wheat, to be ground by the teeth of beasts, so that I may be offered as pure bread of Christ.”

There was Polycarp, the Christian who was so very concerned with righteous living for Jesus Christ, who later said when given the opportunity by his captors to deny Christ to avoid the punishment of being burned at the stake, “For eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?”

There was Bonhoeffer, who said this when the Germans came to take him to the gallows: “This is the end...For me the beginning of life.”

Before them were many others, both Prophets and Church-Age Christians, who were stoned, sawed in two, killed by the sword, mistreated, afflicted, and left destitute. Like Stephen the Martyr, these Christians did not realize the entire fruit of their labor for Christ while on Earth, with the Hebrews writer acknowledging a simple and absolute truth: “The world was not worthy of them...”

For us tonight, I pray that we will be found true to Jesus’s words, “...Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10b). Let us pray tonight.

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