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Acts of the Apostles

Living Praise Presbyterian Church - Home Cell Group Bible Study Feb-Jul 2001



SERVING TABLES

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We Appointed Seven Men

AD 33

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. So we twelve called a meeting of all believers.

“We apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program,” we said. “Now look around among yourselves, brothers and sisters, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word.”

This idea pleased the whole group, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch (a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith, who had now become a Christian). These seven were presented to us apostles, and we prayed for them as we laid our hands on them.

God’s message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

Stephen Is Arrested

AD 36

Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started a debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke.

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen saying, “We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God.” Naturally, this roused the crowds, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. The lying witnesses said, “This man is always speaking against the Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” At this point everyone in the council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel’s.

An eyewitness account of the First-century events in first person.



I am glad for those people in my life who make long to know God better. God's character in them makes me hunger and thirst for him. That is what happens to me when I am exposed to Stephen. I read about him and I want to know God more. Stephen is described as "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, full of God's grace and power." He was a gift to the early church but could not be tolerated by her enemies. Are you described this way by other?

REFLECTION:

What is the best advice you have heard about getting along with people? How have you put it into practice?

Think of a person that makes you want to know God better. What is that person like?

DISCOVERY:

1. What problem arose in the early church?
2. What solution did the apostles offer?
3. How did the group respond to the apostles' idea?
4. What does this passage reveal about Stephen's character and relationship with God?
5. How did God use Stephen to help the early church?

- a. What causes tension and disagreements in the church today?
- b. Why is it important for Christians to get along?
- c. What can we learn from the early church leaders about resolving our differences?
- d. In what aspect of your life would you like to reflect more Spirit and wisdom?



Am I Serving God now?

On reading this, you may start feeling restless. *Maybe I need to change jobs. Perhaps I should relocate. I guess Max is telling me I need to go to seminary....* No, not necessarily.

Again, Jesus is the ideal example. When do we get our first clue that he knows he is the Son of God? In the temple of Jerusalem, he is twelve years old. His parents are three days into the return trip to Nazareth before they notice he is missing. They find him in the temple studying with the leaders. When they ask him for an explanation, he says, “Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business” (Luke 2:49 NKJV).

As a young boy, Jesus already senses the call of God. But what does he do next? Recruit apostles and preach sermons and perform miracles? No, he goes home to his folks and learns the family business. That is exactly what you should do. Want to bring focus to your life? Do what Jesus did. Go home, love your family, and take care of business. *But, Max, I want to be a missionary.* Your first mission field is under your roof. What makes you think they’ll believe you overseas if they don’t believe you across the hall?

But Max, I’m ready to do great things for God. Good, do them at work. Be a good employee. Show up on time with a good attitude. Don’t complain or grumble, but “work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people” (Col. 3:23).

from *Just Like Jesus* by Max Lucado



Topical Study: Stephen¹

Stephen, a man full of the faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5).

A very interesting and profitable method of Bible study is the biographical method. In the study of a character of the Bible you should read all that the Bible says about him and then ponder long over the material². Try to realize the circumstances and conditions described. Think how things must have been in that day until the life stands out before you clearly, and you feel really acquainted with the one about whom you have been reading. In the case of Stephen, just about all we know about him is recorded in Acts 6 and 7. The facts given of his life are very few but impressive.

God has different ways of introducing to the world's notice His great servants. In some cases their lives rise gradually before us from the dawn of childhood to the zenith of their power and usefulness, and then as gradually sink softly to their close. In such a way is given to us the history of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and others. We catch only a fleeting glimpse, and it is gone. Sometimes a hitherto unknown character appears suddenly, bursting in with a message from God and almost immediately disappearing. Elijah, John the Baptist, and Stephen are among these. We know absolutely nothing of Stephen's parents, home, birthplace, early surroundings, and education. We have the story of only the last of his life, in particular the last day of his life.

All seven of the deacons appointed in chapter 6 were filled with the Holy Spirit, but Stephen seems to have been the spiritual giant of them all. Three times in this short record is this fullness of the Spirit mentioned concerning him.

Stephen was not content to confine himself to the business affairs of the church but took every possible opportunity to speak the truth and work for the spread of the gospel. When a delegation of Jews, who refused to believe that the crucified Carpenter of Galilee could be the long-expected Messiah, came to dispute the question with the believers, it was Stephen who met them with arguments of such convincing wisdom and power that they were unable to resist him. Oh, how they hated him for it! Realizing that if they convicted him at all it must be by fraud, they caught him, dragged him before the Sanhedrin, and set up false witnesses.

In answer to the high priest's stern question, "Are these things so?" (7:1). Stephen made a wonderful speech (Acts 7). Briefly he told the story of the nation's history, pointing out that all their great leaders had first been rejected by the men of their own day but afterward proved to be deliverers whom God had chosen and sent. He cited the instance of Joseph (7:9-17), who was first rejected and sold by his

brethren but was afterward raised to such great power that they had to acknowledge him as the savior of their lives (read Gen 45:4-8; cf. Acts 7:9-17). Moses was also first rejected by the people, but he afterward delivered them from bondage and death in Egypt (7:20-36). The prophets were all rejected, persecuted, and slain by the men of their own day, but afterward were seen to be God's messengers (7:52-53). Stephen ended his speech by saying, in substance: "You people of this day are just like your ancestors; you always resist the Holy Spirit. Only you are worse than your fathers; they killed God's messengers who prophesied of the Messiah, but you have killed the Messiah Himself!" (Acts 7:51-53, paraphrase).

At such a charge the hatred of the people broke all bounds. They ran at Stephen and dragged him out of the city, threw off their coats, and stoned him to death. But Stephen was not crushed in mind and heart by the cruel blows that crashed against the body. With his face turned heavenward he was beholding the glories of the other world. God had drawn back the curtain of heaven, and Stephen was having a glimpse inside. In ecstasy he cried out: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Jesus was standing with out-stretched arms to receive His faithful servant. With a prayer on his lips for those sin-blinded ones who were murdering him, he fell asleep amid a shower of stones, and when he awoke he was in the presence of Jesus Christ.

As young Saul stood with those coats piled at his feet (7:58), he listened to Stephen's words and saw Stephen die. So deep an impression was made on him that it was never effaced. Years later, Saul himself was on trial before that very Sanhedrin and for the very cause for which Stephen died. He, too, made great speeches, molded by much the same plan as that of the never to be forgotten address that he had heard Stephen make.

Stephen died for Christ after making one brief speech, but he helped to bring to Christ the man Paul, who for more than a quarter of a century spoke and wrote in burning words that have stirred and thrilled the church for nearly two thousand years, and who did more for the furthering of Christ's kingdom than perhaps any other man who ever lived.

¹ F. B. Meyer has written helpful studies of such Bible characters as Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Paul. Some of his thoughts on Stephen are reflected in parts of this character study.

² Things to look for in the Bible in making a character study are: (1) birth and parentage, (2) early life and training, (3) conversion and any subsequent experiences, (4) character, (5) ministry for God, (6) relationship to others, (7) death and eulogy, (8) why the Bible includes this person in its narrative. The Bible of course does not speak on all these subjects for every person.

A Final Thought:

As we complete this section, review the first six chapters, recalling the highlights of the story of the church's birth and infant years. Account for the various successes of the church despite the tremendous opposition and hindrances.

Sources:

Irving Jensen, **Acts - A Self-study Guide.**

Phyllis J. Le Peau, **Acts.**

Max Lucado. **Just Like Jesus.**

Max Lucado. **Life Lessons on the Book of Acts.**