

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Seven
Acts 6:1-7:16

Day One

6:1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

v. 1 – The Bible never hides bad news or human failures. And here we have both good news and bad news about life in the early church. The good news was that the church was growing and more people were coming to know Jesus. But as people of different cultures responded, it created tension with the original “Jewish Jews.” The Greek believers had different customs, more contact with Gentiles and spoke a different language than did the Hebraic Jews. So there was tension because the Grecian widows weren’t being taken care of in the same manner as those who were related to the Hebraic Jews. In other words, there was an ethnic problem in the church.

There are still ethnic problems today. It may not seem like there are, but that is because many churches don’t have people of different ethnic groups worshipping together. If they do, there is usually still one dominant group and the other smaller groups must adapt and fit in. What can you do to make someone of another ethnic group feel welcomed in your church? Do you see that as your duty?

v. 2 – The problem was brought to the apostles and they refused to get involved! They said it would not be right for them to engage in this issue, for they had higher priority work to do. They weren’t saying that the widows weren’t important; they were simply saying that they couldn’t be expected to do everything. What an important lesson. **Are you trying to do everything? Do you add activities to your list without eliminating others? Are you too busy? Then what do you need to stop doing? And do you have the courage to say “no” to new things that come along?** The apostles did.

Peter Drucker, father of modern management studies, says that no one should be working on more than five goals. If anyone adds a new goal, they should take one of their existing list. **How many goals are you working on now? How about your church or business? How many does it have? Are you too busy? Are you unfocused?**

vs. 3&4 – The apostles did come up with a plan, but it called for the offended parties to elect their own representatives who would be empowered to address and fix this problem. The apostles put the problem right back on the people and stuck to what they did that Jesus wanted them to do: pray and minister the Word. **What are you core activities**

that you do best? Mine are teaching and writing. I've worked to get the time to be able to do both more and I'm working to be able to continue to do them.

Day Two

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. 8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

v. 5 – Once again we see that the common people had a good sense of what needed to be done and recognized the apostle's plan as a good one. **If you are a leader, do you see your coworkers as sources of insight and creativity, or just “hired hands”?**

The people, given the boundaries that the apostles established, elected seven excellent candidates to carry the work forward. **If you are the leader, do you have to hire or release everyone? Do you have the last say in personnel matters?** I used to tell a former supervisor that he had incredible patience for people that I had to work with! Don't saddle people with a team with which they cannot work. Let them choose their own team after you give them the parameters of what is needed and the salary (if there is one). And don't be the only person who is allowed to make a mistake in your organization. Allow others to make some too.

v. 6 – The apostles identified with the elected team by praying and laying their hands on them. I suppose that they were endorsing, empowering and bestowing authority on the new team. Keep in mind here, the apostles weren't establishing a new church government office called “the deacon.” They were simply coming up with a solution to a problem. Nowhere does it state that they intended deacons to be those who govern the church, as is the custom in some churches. I'm not saying that this is the wrong government in churches that implement it. I'm just saying you can't justify that position using this story. Do you agree?

v. 7 – **What are the results of God's ways? What happens when people focus on what they do best and expand the leadership circle and duties to include others?** Here the result was that “the word of God spread.” God's ways work and His ways should breed success and good results in the long-run.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers (Ps 1:1-3).

Is what you're doing prospering? If not, then you must ask yourself if you need to make some adjustments and if you're trying to do too much. It is interesting that the priests came to the faith when the apostles refused to get sucked into the daily operations of the church and stayed focused on what they did best. There are some things that only leaders can do, so they must stay focused and delegate.

v. 8 – Stephen was elected to address the need of the widows, but we see that he was a powerful and spiritual man. He had a ministry of his own and it seemed like he wasn't around long to help the widows, for God had other plans for him. And that leads to another point: When you make organizational changes, they aren't forever. You must always be evaluating who you have on board and what new opportunities are presenting themselves. Don't be surprised if you have to make personnel changes every six months or so. That isn't a sign that you are doing something wrong, but something right. Don't make changes just for the sake of change, however. Make them in response to new opportunities and as people grow and can handle more duties and responsibilities.

Day Three

9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)-Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. 11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

v. 9 – When you function in your purpose, opposition always surfaces. In this case, men from a Greek synagogue began to argue with Stephen. Jesus warned that social acceptance was actually a problem when He said:

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets (Luke 6:26).

Who is speaking ill of you? If no one, then what aren't you doing that therefore has no opponents? I've realized recently that I spent much of my life trying not to offend some and please others, when my sole objective should have been to please God. Today I have some who oppose and criticize me; that is how it is supposed to be. You don't act like an idiot and therefore get opposed, but rather you do God's will and upset some.

v. 10 – Even though they argued with Stephen, they could not win the argument, for God was with him.

Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:11).

At the same time, I think we should rehearse what we could say if we find ourselves in certain situations. At times, we need to go back over a discussion and determine what we should have said and what we will say the next time that topic comes up. **How much time do you spend evaluating what you said and determining how you could have said it more effectively?**

v. 11 – Stephen’s opponents urged some to lie and report blasphemous things that Stephen never said. Since they could not overcome Stephen with honest debate, they resorted to dishonest debate. Don’t expect your enemies or God’s enemies to fight fairly as Christians, because they’re not! If they lied about Jesus, Stephen and Paul, they will lie about you. Remember that the devil is the father of lies and when he is lying, he is on his “home turf.” So don’t be surprised at what your enemies will do to you as they attempt to overcome you.

v. 12 – Stephen’s enemies gained the upper hand, for the rumors and false reports stirred up the leaders, who seized him just as they did the apostles. They assembled a court to judge him, as was their habit. But God had assembled them to hear one of his anointed servants preach about Jesus. The leaders thought they were holding court, but Stephen was holding church. The leaders of the Jews could never stand before God and say, “We didn’t know. We never heard.” They heard on many occasions, but had not accepted the truth.

Day Four

13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." 15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. 7:1 Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

v. 13 – What an exaggeration! They said he “never” stopped speaking against the holy place or law. But what was really going on here? Keep in mind that Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew who had become a Christian. And now the gospel was reaching those Jews who had Greek customs, and this of course was an advance of what would take place in the Gentile world. Looking back, you can understand why the devil strategically opposed this and stirred up Greek Jews to oppose God’s work among the Greek speaking Jews. It was these Jews who would go out and evangelize the Greek non-Jewish world.

The crux of the matter here—and I doubt if anyone understood the implications—was whether followers of Jesus would be limited to Jews or would include Gentiles. Stephen ultimately gave his life to extend the gospel beyond the Jewish core of believers in Jerusalem. **What are you willing to give your life for? What are you doing to reach the unreached like Stephen did?**

v. 14 – Come to think of it, what they accused Stephen of doing actually happened. The Temple came down forever and the traditions handed down to Moses were changed. No one understood at the time that this would happen as it did, but they were right in sensing that Jesus had instituted forces that would lead to major changes in Judaism. And of course these leaders were dedicated to doing anything—even murder—to preserve the status quo. **What are you prepared to do to preserve your status quo? How open to change are you? And if you say, “very open,” what has changed in your life over the last 12 months?**

v. 15 – Once again the council ignored the obvious. They had ignored the fact that an angel had released the apostles from a locked cell. Then they ignored the fact that Stephen looked like an angel—an obvious sign of God’s peace and favor. It’s a terrible thing to have your mind made up so strongly that you can’t see the obvious that’s before you. Do you see that God had prepared and sent Stephen to speak before these leaders? He hadn’t done anything wrong to be where he was; he had done everything correctly. God had chosen to use him in that manner and place. Are you in a touch place? Stop second-guessing how you got there! God led you there. Remember the proverb that states:

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps (Proverbs 16:9).

v. 1 – So the stage was set and now Stephen came front and center. The high priest asked him to respond to the false charges that were being lodged against him. Stephen then began a lengthy sermon, which led to his martyrdom. The Greek word for “witness” is the word from which we get “martyr.” Stephen bore witness to Jesus, giving his life in the process. Let’s read what he said and how it was received.

Day Five

2 To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 3'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' 4 "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. 5 He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. 6 God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

v. 2 – Stephen, who appeared like an angel to them, now preached like one. He was bold and confident and now took the opportunity to preach to the leaders of his day. He was led to present a “salvation history,” so to speak, beginning with Abraham. God appeared to Abraham, so any salvation history must begin with God. It wasn’t anything special about Abraham; it was, however, God’s grace that He appeared to anyone to establish a people for Himself. God still initiates His presence by His grace. You and I don’t deserve it and can’t earn it.

v. 3 – God put Abraham on a faith journey, telling him to leave his land and go to an unknown place. God can ask you to start something and not tell you where it will end up or how you will get there. He simply expects that you will obey and trust Him. Nothing has changed since Abraham’s day. God still operates the same way. The key is not that you read about Abraham’s faith (or anyone else’s, for that matter), but that you embark on your own faith journey. What is God telling you to do? Are you resisting because you don’t know how you’ll get there, or even where you’re going? If that’s the case, you are a son or daughter of Abraham if you step out and go.

v. 4 – Abraham left, but he didn’t go all the way. He settled in Haran, which literally means “delay.” Why the delay? It appears that Abraham didn’t leave his family, but took them with him. So he delayed in Haran until his father died. **Do you have any reasons why you are delaying to do God’s will? What can you do about these delays?** The interesting thing to me is that God waited for Abraham while he delayed. God is patient and kind, but we should not test the limits of His patience by disobeying His commands.

v. 5 – Abraham came to the land where Stephen and the council now stood and lived, but God didn’t give him any land there. He just promised the land to Abraham’s descendants, and Stephen and the Jews were proof of God’s faithfulness to His promise. **Isn’t it interesting that God promised Abraham the land but never gave it to him?** What’s more, Abraham had to fight for that land and twice had to leave it due to famine and drought. Abraham also had to purchase a piece of his own land in which to bury Sarah. What a faith story! God will make you a promise and then have you live in that promise, under conditions that appear like the promise will never be fulfilled. That’s why you need faith.

I know people who have promises of family peace and provision, and who teach about family, yet their family life is less than perfect. God has them living and teaching by faith, yet they can’t see the fulfillment of it. For that, they must trust God, and trust Him while facing insurmountable obstacles. **Is that true in any area of your own life?**

v. 6 – The test would extend to several generations of Abraham’s descendants, for Jacob and his sons would have to leave the land and go to Egypt due to a world famine. This test would go on for four centuries. At that point, it would seem that there was no way that God could or would give Abraham’s descendants the land He had promised them. God will work things in your life so that there is only one way for you to receive His promises and that is through His power and grace. He will not allow you to think that you did it, or that someone else intervened on your behalf.

When I began my business four years ago, I felt like God showed me that whatever I did or received, it would be from Him and no one else. I could not rely on anyone to help. Don’t misunderstand; God has used people to bless and help me, but they aren’t people I would have expected to help. Often they haven’t even been people with whom I had a relationship. What we have and what we’ve done has been because of God and no one else. As this has happened, I’ve had to face how often I looked to many other people and

institutions for help, when I should have been looking to God. This whole process has caused me to grow and learn from Him, a humbling experience. **Can you see any similarities to what you are going through?**

Day Six

7 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' 8 Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs. 9 "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him 10 and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. 11 "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food.

v. 7 – God did intervene and punish Egypt for their mistreatment of His people and God did bring the Israelites out of Egypt back to the land that He had promised them. And today God has still preserved that land for Abraham's descendants and has brought them back to it in 1948. Yet for 500 years after the promise, it looked like nothing would happen as God had promised. Are you waiting for the provision of God's promise? Don't give up. Have faith and put your trust in Him and it will come to pass, if not for you, then for your children and grandchildren.

v. 8 – God instituted circumcision as a sign between God and Abraham. There is so much symbolism in circumcision. It symbolized a cutting away of the flesh—the flesh could not produce the promise of God. It symbolized death at the point of life—Abraham would not have descendants as numerous as the stars by means of his own ability to reproduce. It symbolized a difference between God's people and others—Abraham trusted God and received this seemingly foolish symbol as a mark of faith. If you have the time and interest, I urge you to study circumcision in both Testaments to see what you can learn about this important symbol.

vs. 9&10 – Joseph is one of my favorite Bible characters. I love what the psalmist wrote about him:

He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them — Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true. The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free. He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed, to instruct his princes as he pleased and teach his elders wisdom (Psalm 105:16-22).

God directed the famine that got Joseph to Egypt, where he was subjected to all kinds of ill treatment until he became its ruler. God knows how to prepare you for your future;

sometimes it's a painful preparation because it's an important destination. Study Joseph's life and see what you can apply to your own.

v. 11 – God is the one who “called for” the famine, according to Psalm 105 above. **Are your finances tight? Have you been struggling with what you can do to make them “untight”?** Perhaps there is nothing you can do, since the tightness may be from God. God always uses finances to direct you, just as He used this famine to get Jacob and his sons to Egypt. Perhaps you need to stop struggling and ask God what He is doing in your life. When my finances get tight, I pray, “God, I’ll do whatever you want me to do wherever you want me to do it.” I always assume that the leanness has come to direct me and I want to tell God I’ll go and do whatever.

Day Seven

12 When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. 13 On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. 14 After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. 15 Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. 16 Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

vs. 12-16 – I wonder what the Sanhedrin was doing while Stephen was going through this review of material with which the leaders were all too familiar. This does show us how well versed the ordinary Jew was in Biblical matters. **Could you go through this kind of basic overview? Could you present a thumbnail sketch of Jesus' life and Christianity in general?** This is why we are conducting these studies: so you can be more familiar with God's word and so that the Word can be more a part of who you are.

The Old Testament is an important part of the Bible, too often neglected by New Testament Christians. Paul wrote about the Old Testament when he said:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).

Are you growing in an understanding of and familiarity with God's word? If you are, then you are more useful to God, who can then use you like He used Stephen in this situation. I urge you to do all that you can to make the word of God the most important reference point in your life.