

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Nine
Acts 7:44-8:13

Day One

44 "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. 45 Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, 46 who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

v. 44 – The Jews were enamored with a building, namely the Temple. It was the center of their life, culture and worship. They could not understand that the tabernacle and then the Temple were shadows or symbols of the reality that was to come and of heavenly realities:

They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:4-6).

There is still a tendency among God's people to associate a building with God, considering that building a holy place. I've never understood this thinking. God made it clear that He wants to live in His people, not in a building. Buildings serve a function, providing a place for God's people to gather, not a place for God to live.

vs. 45&46 – As we saw in an earlier study, it wasn't God's idea to build the Temple—it was David's:

"Go and tell my servant David, "This is what the LORD says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in. I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought Israel up out of Egypt to this day. I have moved from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (1 Chronicles 17:4-6).

"I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you (1 Chronicles 17:10-11).

v. 47 – It was Solomon who eventually built the Temple, but it was destroyed centuries later by the Babylonians when they took the Daniel prisoner and decades later when the Jews rebelled. **Do you place a higher priority on the buildings where you worship than God does? Do you feel there are special places where "God dwells?"** Don't do

more to maintain a building than you do to maintain your heart, the place where God dwells in the power of the Spirit.

Day Two

48 "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:
49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?' 51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

v. 48 – You can imagine how offensive these words were to the leaders of the Temple who considered it God’s home! Stephen was attacking the very core of their belief system. What courage Stephen had! And God inspired his speech, so this wasn’t Stephen’s personal agenda or bias. The priests had to face the fact that what they had made a priority wasn’t God’s priority. If you are ever confronted with that fact, you have two choices: defend or abandon your position. The priests decided to defend their position, believing that they were defending God and His priorities. **Do you have the courage to ask: Lord, is there anything that I have made a priority that isn’t one to you? Am I valuing something as important that is unimportant to you?**

v. 49 – Man has consistently tried to find a system that would contain or control God, making Him understandable and accessible to man. If you have a principle or rule that explains God, then that rule can easily become God. And if that rule obeys your commands or follows rules that you can understand and manipulate, then you are positioning yourself to control God (or at least to comprehend His incomprehensible ways).

v. 50 – God is the Creator of everything, even the “rules” that govern our relationship with Him. God isn’t some puppy on our leash that obeys our commands, but we are his sheep who hear and obey His voice. You can’t try to figure God out; you must simply obey Him and be in awe of His inscrutable ways.

v. 51 – This isn’t the way to win friends and influence people! Stephen finished his brief history review with a scathing conclusion that nothing had changed—the Jews were still stiff-necked and hard-hearted toward God! This isn’t a way to win friends and influence people. There’s only so much you can do, however, to ignore or skirt the truth. **Is there anyone or any situation with which you need to be honest at this point in your life? What is holding you back? Is it fear or the Lord? Once you decide what is holding you back, what are you prepared to do about it?**

Day Three

52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have

not obeyed it." 54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

v. 52—Talk is so cheap when it comes to serving the Lord. There are many who proclaim their love and good intentions, but God always provides opportunities that reveal the reality in my heart and yours:

"Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all" (Luke 11:47-51).

By killing Jesus and then His followers and not repenting of the same, the leaders were held responsible for the deaths of all the past prophets, since they gave their approval of what their fathers did by continuing their tradition. Don't just talk about what you will do differently when you are a leader, do it! Otherwise God will fashion circumstances to prove that you are all talk and no action.

v. 53 – Ouch! Stephen told these keepers of the Law that they didn't keep the Law. He said this to men who tithed down to the weeds in their garden. Just because someone follows the rules doesn't mean they have the heart to obey God. They tithed their weeds and then killed Jesus. **In what do you excel—rules or relationship with God?** Don't answer too quickly, for the answer is a critical one for your walk with God and His ability to use you.

v. 54 – The response was predictable—the priests were enraged. I have an article on my website entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Leader." In it, I make the point that the hallmark of authoritarian leadership is anger. The priests felt like they owned God and the interpretations of His commands. So when Stephen challenged their ownership, they had to react with anger to preserve their position. **If you are a leader, are you leading or are you preserving your favored position?**

vs. 55&56 – Stephen didn't notice their anger because he saw something else. He saw Jesus! What do you see when men oppose you? Now I've seen a lot of angry people who felt like they were representing God. Some of them even write me in their anger to correct something I said or wrote. But Stephen wasn't angry! He saw Jesus! He had revelation! **Are you angry? If so, why?** If you are anxious to deliver a word like Stephen did, then you must examine your motives for delivering such a word. Remember what James wrote:

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires (James 1:19-21).

Day Four

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

v. 57 – That's what people do when they get stuck in their own point of view: They cover their ears so they can't hear any more. I've done this many times myself. I couldn't hear someone else because I was so rigid in my own opinions and viewpoints. But the priests didn't just cover their ears—they got aggressive. It's not enough for people to protect their own point of view; oftentimes they must attack yours if it is different. They raised their voices to that nothing could slip through the covering on their ears. How open are you to other people? I am listening to an audio book right and I just don't agree with this woman. But something interesting is happening: She isn't all wrong and she is causing me to rethink some of my conclusions. I may stick to the same conclusion, but I think I will be even more committed because someone challenged me to think. Plus I have no desire to argue with this woman or to expose her as in error. I think God is working something good in me as I seek to listen, learn and have mercy.

v. 58 – I think Luke included this story not only because Stephen was the first martyr, but because it was a good bridge to introduce the man who next to Jesus did the most to impact the early church. For the first time, we see the name Saul mentioned as the one who was manning the coatroom while the priests killed Stephen. What does this tell us about Saul? First, he was young here. Second, he had access to the priests. Some believe he was a member of the Sanhedrin, but others feel he was too young. Third, many believe that Paul watched Stephen die and that impacted him and opened him to Jesus.

What a beautiful thought that Stephen's death did more for the church than his life ever could have. He gave up his life, God touched Saul and Saul went on to found the Gentile churches. **What if God wants you to give your life for another? I'm not talking about death, but about investing in them to make them a better, more effective disciple than you? Are you willing to do this?** After all, you've already given your life to Jesus, so He can invest it wherever He chooses.

v. 59 – Stephen again did not focus on his opposition. He focused on God and prayed to Jesus. **What is your focus when things go wrong?** The writer of Hebrews urged us to keep the right focus in times of stress and trouble:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:2-3).

v. 60 – Stephen’s focus was so directly on God that he prayed just like Jesus did before He died:

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots (Luke 23:34).

At no point did Stephen focus on the people before him, but He kept his eyes on Jesus. *Lord, may I be so taken over by You that You are all that I see. Don't let me respond to the people or circumstances around me. Let me respond to You and do what You would have me do. Amen.*

Day Five

8:1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

v. 1 – Lest anyone think that Saul was an innocent or casual bystander, Luke tells us that he gave his approval to Stephen’s death. So later when Paul wrote the following, it wasn’t just an idle boast or exaggerated comment:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

If God can reach and change Saul, He can touch anyone. **Is there someone that you have given up on? Someone you’ve stopped praying for because they are so hard-hearted or resistant?** Then consider Paul and renew your faith and prayers. Nothing is too difficult for God!

A great persecution had now started, but God used this for His purposes. He had told the disciples that they would go to the ends of the earth, but they had delayed in Jerusalem where it was comfortable. Now God forced them out of their comfort zone and sent them to other peoples. **Are you in your comfort zone where people are concerned? Then why not seek someone out today with whom you would not ordinarily spend time and take them to lunch or to have a cup of coffee?** We are to reach all people for Jesus, not just people who look, talk or behave like us.

v. 2 – I can remember one of the first funerals I presided over as a young pastor. I went back to my office after it was over and just sat at my desk. I kept thinking, “This puts everything into perspective. We live to die, so we must make the most of the time we have to live!” **Are you making the most of your time? Are you acting like you will live forever, or that you have all the time in the world? What can you do today to make this day the most meaningful it can be?**

v. 3 – Saul then went on a rampage. He needed no excuse, no public healing or controversial words to seek out and persecute Christians. He was now proactively going from house to house to ferret out these Jewish heretics.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:13-15).

Be careful. When something bothers you more than it should, it may be because God is trying to get your attention to tell you something. **So is there something that has you angry or consumes your thoughts at this point?** If there is, ask God to show you why it is so and see what you can learn from this.

v. 4 – But here we see God’s purposes again. Those persecuted believers fled from the persecution but directly into the mission fields that God intended for them to go into. It is fascinating to see how the church developed and grew into what God intended it to be and what means and what people He used to do so. I’m glad that things don’t depend on me, but rather on God. He accomplishes His purposes often not because of me but in spite of me. And when that happens, He can truly get the glory and the credit.

Day Six

5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city.

v. 5 – Now we are introduced to another of the men who were chosen in Acts 6 to serve the widows. It doesn’t seem like these men had much time to spend in the local church. They were so gifted and powerful that their ministry took them away from the local church and the widows they were elected to serve. **How about you? Are you too busy? Do you take things on with the best of intentions, but truth be known, there is no way you have time to do that new thing?** Peter Drucker, a management writer, said that everyone should have no more than five goals at a time. Whenever a new goal is added, one must be removed from the list. **I know I am guilty of being overextended. Are you?**

I am certainly not criticizing Philip, for he went forth, probably in this case because of the persecution, and preached the word to the Samaritans, the very group that the apostles weren't eager to minister to when Jesus was alive:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:51-56).

Is there any group of people who aren't among your favorite people? Do you realize that we must put our personal bias outside in the interests of the gospel? Are you willing to do that? Will you?

v. 6 – Signs and wonders always drew a crowd and Philip used these manifestations of the Spirit to preach the Word. I can't help but believe that we would have better results today if we incorporated the miraculous into our evangelistic outreaches.

v. 7 – Philip was doing just what Jesus did—he cast out evil spirits and healed the sick. I'm intrigued by the thought that somehow evil spirits don't exist or function today. That is nonsense. There are many problems (though not all) that could be corrected if we acknowledged that their cause was an evil spirit and then cast the spirit out in Jesus' name! I learned as a pastor one important lesson: You can't pastor a demon! I had people with problems that could not be counseled or prayed away. They had to be cast out! **Are you dealing with any such demonic problems?** Don't keep hitting your head against the wall, so to speak. You will only get the spiritual results you want when you face the spiritual realities behind the problems.

v. 8 – What was the result of Philip's ministry? There was great joy in the city, as the Bible promised there would be!

When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy (Proverbs 11:10).

What can you do to bring joy to the greatest number of people in your city or area? I urge you to do that and keep doing it so that the promise of Proverbs 11:10 will be realized. I like going to places and leaving and leaving a blessing of joy.

Day Seven

9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news

of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

v. 9 – Luke mentioned a man named Simon who was a sorcerer, who boasted that he was someone great. Every generation seems to have these superstars of the occult or famous egomaniacs who are demonically empowered to capture the minds of people and lead them astray. In my own lifetime, I've seen many astrologists, necromancers and fortune-tellers who wrote books and obtained a following. Yet as we saw in our study of Revelation, every force, person, movement or philosophy that exalts itself against Jesus is doomed to fail.

Since there is power in the name of Jesus, we should expect that Jesus and His followers will confront the powers of this age. But Jesus always wins, which is the message of Revelation. Don't ever underestimate the nature of the warfare that surrounds the battle for men's souls and minds.

vs. 10&11 – The people of Samaria had a spiritual champion, or so they thought. It doesn't matter how powerful the person is or how strong his or her following may be, eventually that person will confront Jesus and Jesus wins. I had friend who used to say, "There is more power in one drop of Jesus' blood than all the forces of hell." I agree.

Sometimes this "champion" isn't a person, but rather an idea or philosophy. No matter what form the spiritual champion takes, the result is the same—Jesus is Lord! And this champion may have a significant following; it doesn't really matter.

v. 12 – Philip preached the gospel and worked miracles in the power of the Spirit and men were won over to the Lord, which meant they would abandon Simon. People can't split their loyalty between Jesus and other ideologies or champions and the Samaritans made the correct choice to follow the Lord. Christians are always accused of being narrow-minded and when it comes to Jesus, we are. Jesus is the only Lord and comes not to take His place among the gods, but comes to establish that He is the one and only God.

v. 13 – The great and powerful Simon believed and was baptized. It seems that baptism was a mandatory and immediate step for anyone who professed their faith in Jesus; the same should hold true today. The "great power of God" had met his match and now followed Philip, astonished at the power and miracles that he saw being performed. **Is the Church held in awe today?** In most circles, it isn't. **Why do you think this is so?** One reason is that the Church isn't a center for power that can touch and change people's lives in many cases. And because the Church is no longer "taking the fight" to where the power centers are, but rather waiting for them to come to the Church. We are no longer aggressively proclaiming; often we are only talking to ourselves.

What can you do to help reverse this trend? You cannot change the whole world or the whole Church, but you can change yourself by the grace of God to be who God wants

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you to be. Go forth and declare God in your world of business, school, family and friends. Do what you can to confront the powers of the day and see Jesus reign supreme.