



The Ministry of Stephen Acts 6:1-7:53

Introduction

It is probable a considerable period of time elapsed between Acts chapters 5 and 6. The apostles continued their ministry of preaching and teaching and the church continued to grow. However, as the number of believers increased, there were certain needs which became evident. There were only twelve apostles to lead, but thousands of believers who had physical as well as spiritual needs. In Acts 6 and 7, Luke describes how the problem of meeting some of those needs was solved by choosing qualified men to serve within the church. Luke also introduces one of those servants, Stephen, with the account of his brief but powerful ministry.

Outline of Acts 6:1-7:53

- I. Stephen's Service in the Church - Acts 6:1-15
- II. Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin - Acts 7:1-53

I. Stephen's Service in the Church - Acts 6:1-15

The church was growing rapidly and, as might be expected, a problem arose. Directed by the Holy Spirit, the apostles dealt with it in a prompt, orderly, and democratic manner. God brought forth new leaders to complement the ministry of the apostles. Stephen was one of those men.

A. A Chosen Servant - Acts 6:1-7

Notice that the new leaders were chosen (6:5) and not volunteers. Stephen and the others were appointed to their task by God.

1. Discrimination in the church - 6:1

There were two groups of Jews in Jerusalem. The Hebrews were native to Judea, kept the Hebrew customs, spoke Aramaic, and considered themselves superior to the Hellenists. The Hellenists were Jews who had lived in other nations. They were more liberal in their customs and spoke only Greek and the language of the country from which they had come. There was friction between the two groups, which seems to have continued with those who had become believers.

The church took care of its own poor, including widows in need. The Hellenists accused the Hebrews of discriminating against their widows in the daily serving of food.

2. Solution - 6:2-4

The apostles called a church business meeting to explain the situation. Their ministry was to preach and teach the word of God (Acts 1:8). It consumed their time, especially since much prayer was required so the word might be presented with power to prepared hearts.

The apostles asked the congregation to select seven men to oversee the distribution of food for the needy. Three qualifications were set forth. Each man must be "*of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*" These characteristics are indispensable for service within the church today also.

3. Seven men commissioned - 6:5-7

The names of those who were chosen are all Greek, but this does not necessarily mean they were all Hellenists. Greek names were common, even among the Hebrews. Luke singles Stephen out as being *full of faith and the Holy Spirit*. He describes Nicolas as a proselyte from Antioch, meaning that he had come from paganism and converted to Judaism before becoming a Christian. Nothing is mentioned about the other five men, and only two of the group of seven are referred to again in the Scriptures — Stephen (Acts 6-8) and Philip (Acts 8).

The apostles prayed for the seven chosen men and then laid hands on them. The laying on of hands represented a commission of authority. The practice was carried over from Old Testament times (Numbers 27:22-23) where it was customarily performed by the Jews when men were admitted to the Sanhedrin.

With the apostles freed to attend to their ministry of prayer and preaching, the word of God went forth effectively and the church continued to grow. Many Jewish priests became believers during this time.

B. A Faithful Servant - Acts 6:8

Stephen's ministry spread beyond the daily business of distributing food to the needy. As he proved himself faithful in that ministry, God used him in other areas as well. In addition to being filled with the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and faith, Stephen was *full of grace* (NASB) and *power*. The people were able to see the evidence of this as he performed *great wonders and signs*, most likely miraculous healings such as those done by the apostles.

C. A Persecuted Servant - Acts 6:9-15

1. The dispute - 6:9-10

The *Synagogue of the Freedmen* was probably a group of Jews whose ancestors had been slaves in Rome. They had received their freedom, returned home to Jerusalem, and started their own synagogue. (A synagogue was composed of 10 or more Jews who met together to read and interpret Scripture. There may have been hundreds of synagogues in Jerusalem at this time.) Having come from outside of Judea, the Freedmen were Greek-speaking Hellenists.

They had a formal debate with Stephen which they were unable to win because he possessed the power of the Holy Spirit and spoke with wisdom. This was a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised in Luke 21:15: "I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist."

2. Bribery - 6:11

Unable to win their argument with Stephen, the Freedmen secretly bribed some men to falsely accuse him of blasphemy against Moses and God.

3. Arrest - 6:12-15

The accusers stirred up the *elders*, the *scribes*, and the *people*. This is the first record of the common people becoming hostile toward the disciples. Due to the uprising, the authorities arrested Stephen and took him before the council, the Sanhedrin. The third time followers of Jesus were taken before the highest Jewish court.

a. False witnesses - 6:13-14

It is most likely the witnesses did not fabricate the charges against Stephen but maliciously twisted the truth he had spoken. They charged him with speaking blasphemous words against "*this holy place* [the temple] *and the law*". They falsely claimed they heard him say that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the Mosaic law. Stephen's speech in chapter 7 shows that he supported the law of Moses. Furthermore, he did not speak against the temple. He merely showed that God was not confined to an earthly, man-made temple. In Luke 21:5-6, Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple. We do not know whether Stephen actually had taught this or if the rulers had remembered Jesus' prediction and now used it against him.

b. *Face as the face of an angel* - 6:15

As the charges were made against Stephen, every council member was looking at him intently and could not deny

his holy countenance. Albert Barnes ([Barnes' Notes on the New Testament](#)) notes that the expression *as the face of an angel* is common in Jewish writings and signifies deep feeling, sincerity, and confidence in God.

II. Stephen's Speech to the Sanhedrin - Acts 7:1-53

When asked to respond, Stephen did not address the charges against him directly, but his answer reveals he knew, loved, and cherished the Old Testament scriptures. His words show that he believed in Moses and the divine authority of the law which was delivered through him (7:38).

Stephen began his defense by addressing the council as "*brethren and fathers*" and referring to Abraham as "*our father*" (7:2). This showed that he shared a common covenant and inheritance with the men of the council. However, Stephen pointed out that the people of Israel had a history of rejecting God's leaders. They had rejected Joseph (7:9-16), Moses (7:27-35), and the prophets (7:52). Moses had predicted the coming of a Prophet greater than himself and commanded the Jews to listen to Him (7:37). Stephen had listened. His accusers had not. They were the ones who had rejected God's law, God's leaders, and the Just One (7:52). Stephen reminded them of these facts by giving a history lesson.

A. Israel Had a Covenant with God - Acts 7:1-8

Abraham had been called by God from Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8), "*this land in which you now dwell*" (7:4), and had followed God by faith. He did not acquire ownership of the land, but held it as a promise from God. Neither did his descendants possess the land right away, but according to God's words (7:6-7), they first spent 400 years in Egypt.

God had promised Abraham He would give the land to his descendants for an everlasting possession. The sign of the covenant promise which Abraham and his descendants were to keep was circumcision. "*Every male child among you shall be circumcised*" (Genesis 17:10). The covenant was kept as Abraham was blessed with twelve great-grandsons, the twelve patriarchs (7:8) of the twelve tribes of Israel.

B. Israel Rejected Joseph - Acts 7:9-16

The patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, rejected their brother Joseph and sold him into Egypt. But God was with Joseph and accomplished His purposes in spite of their evil scheme. When Joseph was taken to Egypt, God did not abandon him, but rather exalted him to be governor. God used Joseph to save his father, Jacob, and his entire family from starvation when a famine

spread throughout the land of Canaan. Stephen noted in his speech that even though the patriarchs had gone to live in Egypt, they still insisted upon being buried in the promised land.

NOTE: Jacob's body was taken from Egypt to the promised land for burial (Genesis 49:29-33 and 50:12). Although Joseph was originally buried in Egypt (Genesis 50:26), his bones were carried back to the promised land by Moses (Exodus 13:19) and buried in Shechem by Joshua (Joshua 24:32).

C. Israel Rejected Moses

Stephen had been accused of blasphemy against Moses, but his speech shows that he honored Moses. It was the people of Israel who had rejected Moses as the deliverer sent from God.

1. Moses' early life - 7:17-29

God had been with His people while they were in Egypt and they had multiplied. Then the king who had known Joseph died and another king with a different character took his place. He did not know the history of all Joseph had done. He oppressed and mistreated the children of Israel and ordered their infant boys be put to death. It was into this environment that Moses was born. He was well-pleasing to God.

a. Saved by faith - 7:17-22

By faith, Moses' parents defied the king and raised Moses in their home until he was three months old (Hebrews 11:23). When he could no longer be hidden, he was put in a basket and placed in the Nile River (Exodus 2:5). There he was found by Pharaoh's daughter, who took him and raised him as her son.

b. Concerned for his people - 7:23-28

At the age of forty, Moses' heart was moved to leave the Pharaoh's palace and visit his own people, the children of Israel. When he saw a fellow Israelite being mistreated by an Egyptian, he struck the Egyptian and killed him. The following day Moses came upon two Israelites fighting and tried to resolve the conflict between them but was rejected. They had heard about Moses' killing the Egyptian and resented Moses trying to be ruler and judge over them. Moses supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by His hand, but they did not (7:25).

c. Exiled in Midian - 7:29

When Moses realized the people knew he had killed the Egyptian, he was afraid and fled to Midian. There he married and God blessed him with two sons.

2. Moses called by God - 7:30-34

After living in Midian forty years, God revealed Himself and spoke to Moses. He ordered the trembling Moses to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. God then commanded Moses to go to Egypt and deliver his people from their oppression.

3. Moses delivered the people of Israel - 7:35-36

The one who had been rejected by his people because they thought he was trying to be a "ruler and a judge" (7:27) was now made a "ruler and a deliverer" by God. The word "deliverer" here is the Greek word which means "a redeemer," or "one who releases." Moses redeemed his people, releasing them from slavery, performing signs and wonders in Egypt, in the crossing of the Red Sea, and for forty years in the wilderness.

4. Moses had prophesied of a Prophet to come - 7:37

As a redeemer, Moses foreshadowed a greater Prophet to come, the Lord Jesus Christ. Moses instructions to the people were, "Him you shall hear."

5. Moses had mediated the giving of the living oracles - 7:38

Stephen referred to God's laws as *living oracles*. They were "oracles" because they were inspired and revealed by God, and they were "living" because the power of God was in them (Hebrews 4:12). Moses received the written law from God on Mt. Sinai and delivered it to the people of Israel.

6. The people of Israel would not obey - 7:39-41

They rejected the law, their hearts turned back to Egypt, they called Aaron to make hand-made gods, and he made a calf. They sacrificed to the idol and "rejoiced in the works of their own hands" rather than the laws of God.

7. God "gave them up" - 7:42-43

Because the people rejected true worship and turned to idols, God allowed them to go their own way. The answer to the question of the prophets (Amos 5:25) in 7:42 is "no". Israel did not sacrifice to God during the forty years in the wilderness. However, they did worship Moloch, an Ammonite god, which is specifically forbidden in Leviticus 18:21. They did worship Remphan, a pagan god associated with the stars. And, as predicted by the prophet Amos, God did eventually judge them for their idolatry and carry them "away beyond Babylon".

D. Israel Misplaced Their Confidence -
Acts 7:44-50

In this passage, Stephen explained that Israel placed great importance upon their temple and took great pride in it. However, God did not live there!

1. "*The tabernacle of witness*" - 7:44-45

God gave Moses the pattern for the tabernacle in the wilderness. It was a "*tabernacle of witness*" because it witnessed to God's presence with His people (Exodus 25:9: 40; 26:30; 27:8). Moses constructed the tabernacle and it was carried with the nation throughout their wilderness wanderings. After Moses' death, Joshua's generation carried the tabernacle into the promised land.

2. The temple - 7:46-50

Because the tabernacle was merely a portable tent, King David desired to build a permanent house for God (2 Samuel 7:2), but God refused. It was David's son, Solomon, who built a temple for God. However, Stephen pointed out that God does not dwell in temples made with hands. The temple, like the tabernacle, was only a symbol of God's presence and not a house for God to live in. Stephen remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, that heaven was God's throne and the earth His footstool. God made all things, so who could presume to make a house for Him to dwell (Isaiah 66:1 as quoted in Acts 7:49-50)?

The simple fact is that God does not dwell in buildings made by men. Solomon had recognized this and said, "*Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!*" (1 Kings 8:27).

E. Judgments upon Israel - Acts 7:51-53

At this point in his speech, Stephen turned upon the men of the Sanhedrin with strong accusations.

1. "*You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears*" - 7:51

These are the exact words God Himself had used in speaking of His people. (See Exodus 33:3; Leviticus 26:41; Jeremiah 6:10.) They were "stiffnecked," meaning spiritually stubborn, refusing to turn and go God's way. Their uncircumcised hearts meant they were unregenerate. There was no sign of repentance and openness to God. Their uncircumcised ears did not listen to God and did not delight in His word.

2. "*You always resist the Holy Spirit*" - 7:51

The Holy Spirit had been speaking to the council as Stephen spoke, but they were resistant. The word "resist" which Stephen used is a very strong word which denotes "active resistance." They were willfully refusing to accept the Holy Spirit's witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. They had been presented with solid evidence that Jesus Christ was their Messiah, but they were unyielding in their relentless resistance. Do you know any people who are like that today?

3. They betrayed and murdered the "*Just One*" - 7:52

Their fathers had persecuted the prophets. Their fathers had killed those who had foretold the coming of the "*Just One*", the Lord Jesus Christ, their Messiah. Now this generation of Jews had betrayed and murdered Him.

4. They had not kept the law - 7:53

The giving of the law at Mt. Sinai was a solemn occasion upon which God spoke directly to the people (Exodus 20:1) in the midst of thunder, lightning flashes, trumpet sound, smoke (Exodus 20:18), and the attendant host of angels (Deuteronomy 33:2 and Galatians 3:19). In spite of the majesty of the law and the magnificent and memorable manner in which it was given, these men of Israel had not kept it.

Applications

1. Are you ever stiff-necked toward God? How often do you stubbornly go your own way and follow your own plans instead of carefully consulting and obeying God's word?
2. Do you habitually resist the Holy Spirit or do you daily and moment by moment seek to be filled with the Spirit?
3. Do you place your confidence in anything other than God Himself? Do you take pride in your church, your church attendance, your ministry, or your position of leadership rather than humbling yourself before God and boasting in Christ alone? See Galatians 6:14.
4. Do you follow people due to fear or do you follow God by faith?
5. How much do you love the Word of God? Do you love it enough to read it daily, meditate on it, apply it to your life, and share it with others?
6. After reading about and studying the church problem which was presented in Acts 6, what will you do to help prevent problems and also help solve them when they arise in your church?