

Review & Intro

In Acts 4 and 5:

- We saw the Church was flourishing spiritually and caring for one another's material needs.
- We were introduced to Barnabas.
- Satan continued to attack the church internally and externally.
- The common people highly esteemed the Church.
- After the apostles' arrest, Gamaliel advised the council to be calm.

Moving into Chapters 6 and 7:

- The enemy will again try to weaken the Church, this time by creating strife.
- After this is resolved, we see another wave of power released in Jerusalem.
- We will see a more serious persecution beginning in the wake of Stephen's ministry and martyrdom.
 - This persecution marks a change of attitude from the religious officials.
 - The people become less receptive to the Gospel message.
 - The disciples will scatter.
 - We will be introduced to Philip the Evangelist.
 - We will also meet Saul of Tarsus.
- In short, Chapters 6 and 7 mark a major turning point in the Book of Acts.

Dealing With Disunity (Acts 6:1)

1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

- Here we have a new form of attack: the attack of disunity.
 - Paul would later tell the Church to make every effort to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (see Ephesians 4:3).
 - The way the apostles dealt with this was going to be critical.
- The Church was already caring for its poor widows. The way funds were being distributed, or people’s perception of it, was causing murmuring or grumbling.

Between Hebrews and Hellenists...

- The so-called *Hebrew* believers were more steeped in Hebrew culture, with more of a connection to Judea and the Aramaic language.
- This would have included the original believers and apostles.
- Both the Galileans and Jerusalem-area believers would have been more oriented towards using Aramaic and Hebrew.
- The other group is the *Hellenists*. These were not Greek people, but Jews.
- The word *Hellenist* is related to the name of a mythical ancestor of the Greeks, *Hellen*. Greeks call their own country *Hellas*. A *Hellenist* was a Jew who was more immersed in Greek culture. If you *Hellenized*, it meant that you were adopting Greek ways and customs.

- Then, as now, millions of Jews lived outside of Israel in the *Diaspora* (the “Dispersion.” Because of migrations and conquests, the Jewish people had been dispersed all over the known world. As much as 10% of the Roman Empire was Jewish at this time.
- Diaspora Jews would have been much more likely to speak Greek or another local language than they were to speak Aramaic.
 - The crowd in Acts 2 could understand Greek and the other languages of their home regions, but they might not have known Aramaic or Hebrew.
 - Many used the Greek translation of the Bible: the *Septuagint*.
 - Jerusalem had synagogues for Hellenist Jews from many different places.
 - Hellenist Jews might have flowed a lot better with someone like Barnabas than they would with Peter and Andrew.
- The number of poor Hellenists in Judea could have been high compared to the number of poor Hebrews, for several reasons. Whatever the reasons were, it seems to have created some inequality between the two groups.

The Apostles' Solution (6:2-7)

2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

- This is the only congregational meeting, so to speak, in *Acts*.
- The apostles weren't opposed to serving others; Jesus had taught them to love and serve one another. They had to do what Jesus had called *them* to do.
- All the "serving" in this story is described by the word *diakonia*, which means ministry or serving. That's the word that gives us our word *deacon*.
- There was no electioneering here, but the apostles' wise solution was for them to seek out seven men who were already known to the people.
 - Notice that everyone who was selected had a Greek name.
 - Part of the solution to making things just seems to have been allowing people to choose leaders who were like them.
- The spiritual qualifications were also wise:
 - They had to be people of good reputation.
 - Second, they must be full of the Holy Spirit.
 - They would also have to be men of wisdom.
 - This is similar to the story of Moses, and the 70 elders of Israel.
- This pleased the people, and enabled the Twelve apostles to do what God had called *them* to do. They wouldn't be sidetracked by administrative duties.

About The Seven

- Most notable among the Seven is Stephen, to whom Luke gives a rare a glowing character reference.
- Philip (the Evangelist) is the other man of the Seven who will be prominent.
- It's been said that Stephen and Philip were used by the Lord to break the Church out into its next phases, so it would minister to some people groups who were on the fringes of Jewish culture.
- Regarding the five other "deacons," Scripture really says nothing at all.
- When the crisis was resolved, the Gospel spread in a powerful way.
- We have also the interesting detail of many priests believing in Jesus. There were thousands of priests at this time, and most of them were simple people, not Sadducees or elites.

Stephen's Ministry And Arrest (6:8-7:1)

8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen

(Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then

they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words

against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the

scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They

also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous

words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus

of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel. 1 Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

- Luke will now focus our attention on Stephen, his ministry, and his defense before the council.
- Luke highlights how powerfully the Lord is using Stephen (“great wonders and signs”). This is rare language for the Holy Spirit to use.
- Stephen has a dispute with the Jews of a particular synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen.
 - Freedmen were former slaves who had been sent free.
 - These people seem to have come from different regions at a bit of a distance from Jerusalem: Cyrene (North Africa); Alexandria (Egypt); Cilicia (home of Paul); and Asia (Asia Minor).
- They could not resist the wisdom that Stephen possessed or the S/spirit.
- As with Jesus, false witnesses were procured in order to get Stephen in front of the council and eliminate him.
- For the first time we see *the people* getting stirred up against the believers.
- The false witnesses claim Stephen has transgressed by speaking against the Temple and the Law. There’s an indirect attack on Jesus as well.
- We’re going to witness a scene that’s very similar to the trial of Jesus.

Understanding Stephen's Defense (Acts 7)

- In some ways, this is the most *important* speech in the Book of Acts.
- This is the speech that ends up catapulting the Gospel into places where it has never gone before.
- We can divide the speech into several sections.
 - Abraham
 - Joseph
 - Moses
 - David and Solomon.
- Don't be deceived by the apparent simplicity of the speech – it is more than just a recitation of Israelite history. There is real purpose here.
 - Stephen will show how God spoke to them, how God was with them even *before* they were in the land, and when they were *outside* it.
 - God's relationship with them was not about the Land or the Law per se, but came about simply because God had revealed Himself to them.
 - He will show them how many times they had disobeyed God, missed God, and delayed in obeying God. They also rejected God's messengers.
 - He's also going to show them that God doesn't need a Temple, and indeed God cannot be confined to a Temple.
 - Hearing all of that, and hearing Stephen tell them that they were disobedient to God, enraged the council and resulted in Stephen's death.

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