

His Truth is Marching On!

Acts 7-12

So much history ... so little time!

- Stephen, the First Martyr
- Conversion of the Ethiopian
- Conversion of Paul
- Conversion of the Household of Cornelius, the first gentile believers
- Supernatural Deliverance of Peter
- Supernatural Destruction of Herod

Stephen, the First Martyr

- Stephen was one of the first deacons, chosen in Acts 6:5, along with Philip, and some others.
- He was a man full of the Spirit, and he was ready to serve the congregation as a deacon.
- He was not a “leader” of the church, just a humble “servant”.
- Yet God chose Stephen to deliver a great sermon of condemnation to the Jews.

Stephen, the First Martyr

Acts 7

- Acts 7:2-37 Stephen recalled history from Abraham to Moses.
- They reject Moses authority: Acts 7:27 *Who made you a ruler and judge over us?*
- They reject the Lord's authority: Acts 7:40 *Make for us gods who will go before us ...*
- Acts 7:44-50 Stephen recalled history from Joshua to Solomon.
- Acts 7:51-53 Stephen summarizes their rebellion. He calls them:
 - Stiff-necked
 - Uncircumcised in heart
 - Persecutors and killers of prophets
 - Betrayers and murderers of Christ

Stephen, the First Martyr

Acts 7

- Acts 7:2-53 reminds us of Jesus indictment against the scribes and pharisees in Matthew 23:13-36.
- The Lord summarizes their rebellion in Matthew 23:31-36.
- In writing about the same incident, Luke 11:53-54 records that the scribes and pharisees turned very hostile.
- In Acts 7:54, they began *gnashing their teeth* against Stephen.

Stephen, the First Martyr

Acts 7

- Acts 7:56 Stephen saw the Lord *standing* at the right hand of God!
- The Lord was standing, not sitting, to honor His servant!
- They stoned Stephen.
- Acts 7:59 Like Jesus, Stephen asked the Lord not to lay this sin of murder against them.
- He then surrendered his spirit to the Lord!
- But there was one important difference. Stephen was never *forsaken by God*, as the Lord was in Matthew 27:46. Instead Stephen was received into His arms.

Stephen, the First Martyr

Acts 7

- Stephen was the first of many martyrs.
- The world will reject us, scorn us, discriminate against us, persecute us.
- In many countries they even murder us.
- The Lord said in Matthew 5:11-12 *Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great ...*

Introduction to Saul of Tarsus

Acts 8

- In Acts 8:1-3 we are introduced to Saul.
- Acts 9:15 the Lord says Saul is a *chosen instrument of Mine to bear My Name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel*.
- But right now Saul was persecuting Christians, starting with Stephen.
- He was entering house after house, dragging Christians off to prison.

Persecution of Christians

Acts 8

- The persecution of Saul and other pharisees scattered the Christians.
- They went to Samaria, and were preaching the Word.
- They were also healing the sick, casting out unclean spirits.
- At this time, the Lord authenticated their ministry by signs and miracles.
- Even a clever “magician” named Simon was impressed, and came to believe.

Persecution of Christians

Acts 8

- However, Simon did not understand the Salvation of God.
- He presumed he could purchase the Lord's power!
- In Acts 8:20-23, Peter rebuked Simon, and showed him he was stuck in the *gall of bitterness and the bondage of iniquity*.
- In Acts 8:24, Simon repents.

Persecution of Christians

Acts 8

- Was Simon's repentance real? Was he saved?
- From Acts 8:18-19 Simon seemed to be interested in God's miraculous power.
- Luke never stated that Simon received the Holy Spirit.
- It is likely that Simon's belief in Acts 8:13 was not a saving faith.
- It is possible that his repentance in Acts 8:24 was real, but only God knows.

Calling the Ethiopian Official

Acts 8

- In the midst of all this great work of miracles, and conversion, Philip is whisked away by the Lord.
- He has an important rendezvous!
- A high ranking Ethiopian Official had visited Jerusalem, acquired a copy of Isaiah and had started reading it.
- He had read 52 chapters, and has now come all the way to Isaiah 53.
- Exactly at this time, Philip shows up, whisked away from his ministry in Samaria.

Calling the Ethiopian Official

Acts 8

- Philip explains the scripture of Is 53 to the Ethiopian.
- The Ethiopian humbled himself and believed and was baptized.
- Why did the Lord bring Philip to speak to the Ethiopian?
- Why did the Lord move Stephen to speak to the Jews?
- Why did the Lord move Peter to speak to Simon?

Calling the Ethiopian Official

Acts 8

- 2 Corin 5:18 *Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*
- The ministry of reconciliation is given to believers, not to angels.
- The Lord Himself only preached the Gospel when He appeared in His incarnation, as merely a man.
- John 6:42 *They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?...”*
- When He was resurrected, He only appeared to those who loved Him. He appeared to none who had rejected Him.

Calling the Ethiopian Official

Acts 8

- When a human agent talks with an unbeliever, the unbeliever is free to accept or reject the Gospel.
- The Jews rejected the Gospel from Jesus when he appeared as merely a man.
- The Jews rejected the Gospel from Stephen.
- It is uncertain if Simon accepted the Gospel from Peter.
- The Ethiopian accepted the Gospel from Philip.
- If the Lord Himself appeared before us, we have no choice except to submit, to believe!
- But God desires us to freely accept His Salvation.
- This free choice to accept or reject is only possible when a human agent presents the Gospel.

Calling the Ethiopian Official

Acts 8

- Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, in their excellent book / *Don't have enough faith to be an Atheist* make a critical observation.
- They say that God gives us *convincing evidence of Himself*.
- But not *compelling evidence*.
- The listener has to be free to reject!
- So don't be disheartened when someone you share with rejects the Gospel.
- God has allowed that.

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9

- Well, Paul was a very hard nut to crack!!
- But God got Paul's attention in a very spectacular way.
- He spoke to Paul directly.
- Acts 9:4, *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*
- Interesting point: the persecution of the Christian, is persecution of Christ!
- Likewise, the rejection of the Christian, is a rejection of Christ!
- But even in this instance, Christ did not preach the Gospel to Paul.

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9

- The Lord stopped Paul in his tracks by striking him blind!
- He realized that in persecuting Christians, he was persecuting Jesus.
- But the resurrected Lord did not explain the Gospel ... that was left to the ministry of the Christian whom He would send.
- The Lord sent Ananias to lay hands on Paul, to pray for him *in the name of Jesus whom he was persecuting*, and regain his sight!
- Then Paul knew that Jesus indeed was the Messiah!

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9

- Paul then stayed with the disciples, a changed man, as they taught him about Christ.
- Though the Lord stopped Paul, He used a human agent to share the Gospel with him.
- Paul then had a choice ... he could accept the Gospel, or reject it.
- By God's Grace, Paul accepted the Gospel from Ananias.

The Conversion of Cornelius

Acts 10

- Cornelius was a good man by human standards.
- An angel of the Lord appeared to Cornelius in a vision, and told him to go and see Peter.
- Peter had a vision regarding accepting what God has cleansed.
- Peter shares the Gospel with Cornelius and his household.
- Cornelius and his household have a choice.
- Cornelius and his household accept the Gospel from Peter.
- Notice that though an angel appeared in a vision to Cornelius, God sent a human agent, Peter, to share the Gospel.

The Conversion of the Gentiles

Acts 11

- Until now, the Jews believed the Gospel for only for Jews.
- Some of the Jewish believers took issue with Peter for eating with the Gentiles.
- Peter shared his vision, and the story of Cornelius.
- He shared how he came to Cornelius home and shared the Gospel.
- He explained how they believed and the Holy Spirit was given to them too.
- The Jewish believers then accepted the Gentiles. Acts 11:18 ... *Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life”.*

The Deliverance of Peter

Acts 12

- Herod then arrested and killed James, the brother of John.
- It pleased the unbelieving Jews. So he arrested Peter also.
- But God sent an angel to rescue Peter.
- Peter walked out of jail ... the guards were guarding an empty jail!
- Peter came to the home of Mary, mother of John Mark and surprised the believers there!
- Herod put to death the guards who were guarding Peter.
- Notice, sometimes God rescues His children, and other times, He allows them to be mistreated or killed.

Herod meets his judgement Acts 12



**Colosseum at Cesarea Philippi
The Lord judged Herod here**

The Deliverance of Peter

Acts 12

- Herod was strutting about in this colosseum.
- He was delivering a public address to the people.
- He was struck down during his oration.
- Acts 12:23 states: *and he was eaten by worms, and died.*
- Josephus states that he suffered for five days, and then died.

The Gospel and Free Will

Acts 7-12

- God respects the Free Will that He gave to Man.
- The Jews rejected the Gospel from Christ as a man.
- The Jews rejected the Gospel from Stephen.
- It is uncertain if Simon accepted the Gospel from Peter.
- The Ethiopian accepted the Gospel from Philip.
- Paul accepted the Gospel from Ananias.
- Cornelius accepted the Gospel from Peter.
- Judas had seen Jesus heal the sick, feed thousands, walk on water, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead. None alive today had more evidence than Judas. Still he rejected the Gospel from Christ as a man.

The Gospel and Free Will

Acts 7-12

- God has ordained that the Gospel be spread only by human agents, fallen and redeemed believers.
- 2 Corin 5:18 *Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*
- The ministry of reconciliation is given to believers, not to angels, nor even to the resurrected Lord Himself.
- In this way, men are free to accept or reject the Gospel.
- Our job is only to share. Do not be disheartened if you and your message are rejected.
- God has allowed that.