

Scattering Seeds

I can't believe we are starting Week 3 of our homework! I hope by now you have found a routine for spending time in God's Word. One of the benefits of doing your homework a little every day is that it will help you establish a habit of seeking time with the Lord daily. It is so easy to fall out of the practice of spending time with the Lord every day, but if we have something we are actively working on, with something of a dead-line, it becomes easier to keep in the habit. I hope that you are experiencing the peaceful and joyful rewards of dedicating some of your precious time to Jesus every day. I know that once I step back into a full time Bible study, and I miss a day or two (because it happens, I know!) I just can't wait to get back into my Bible and hear Jesus speaking to me. God bless you as you spend time in His Word this week!

When we think of the church in its infancy, I don't think most of us realize that even within the church itself there was some strife. We will be introduced to a bit of that this week as the Christians in Jerusalem have to meet the needs of both the Jewish believers who originated from Judea and their Greek counterparts. The Greek Jews are those of the Diaspora who had been relocated from Judea for various reasons but have returned to Jerusalem. These Jews are more "Greek" or *Hellenistic* in their customs, traditions and language than the Jews of Judea, or *Hebraic* Jews. We will see the church learn how to accommodate both the Hellenist and Hebraic believers. We will be a witness to the death of one of the early leaders in the Jerusalem church. We will be introduced to a zealous Pharisee from Antioch named Saul of Tarsus. And because of Saul's persecution we will see the Hellenist believers scattered from Jerusalem, carrying the gospel with them.

Meeting the Needs of the Church

As the number of disciples and believers continued to increase, the administration of the church couldn't keep up with the needs of its members. Those with needs were being overlooked and their voices went unheard. We must remember that a body of believers is comprised of human beings who are not perfect, the church is not perfect, but we serve a God that will meet all of our needs when we strive to work together and allow the Holy Spirit to take the lead. As you work on today's scripture passage, keep in mind the needs of your church and its individuals. *Heavenly Father, let your daughter see the movement of the Holy Spirit in this passage today. Let it open her eyes to the movement of the Holy Spirit in her life and in her church, allowing her to be a spirit-filled and spirit-led member of her congregation. Amen.*



Read Acts 6:1-7 and answer the following questions.

What does verse one tell us is the source of strife in the Jerusalem church?

🔥 Why do you think this may have been happening? Consider the background of the Apostle's and the differences between the Hebraic believers and the Grecian believers.

What was the Apostles' reason for not addressing the food crisis themselves?

What was their solution?

What were the criteria for those chosen?

Who were chosen?

The men chosen to fill this roll in ministering to the needs of the Grecian believers were all Hellenist believers themselves. The fact that each of the seven bears a Greek name points to the likelihood of their being Hellenists rather than Hebraic Jews.¹ The Philip who is mentioned is not the apostle, but another believer who we will meet in Acts 8:5. Luke likely mentions Stephen first and emphasizes his being *“full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”* because it is Stephen that Luke will profile next in his narration.

This passage ends with Luke telling us again that the word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem continued to increase, including “a large number of priests [becoming] obedient to the faith.”

What priests are coming obedient to the faith?

What affect would the continued growth of the Christians and the conversion of Jewish priests have on the Jewish leadership?

What do you think is the Holy Spirit's role in this passage?

Personal Reflection

Does your church have enough spirit-filled individuals who volunteer to help those in need within your church? Do you know any individuals in your church whose needs are not being met? If you answered yes to either question, seriously pray to the Lord about what you can do to improve things. How is the Spirit moving in your church? Are its members open to the presence and movement of the Spirit in order to lift up and help one another?

¹ NAC

Stephen

In our previous passage we were introduced to Stephen, “*a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 6:5). Today’s lesson will show us just how filled with faith and the Holy Spirit Stephen is. Our lesson today will also show us to what extent the Holy Spirit will equip us to be fully obedient to God’s call on our life. The presence of the Holy Spirit within each of us is God’s super-natural gift that allows us to speak boldly in truth and righteousness, testifying to the love and grace of not only God our Father, but also of Jesus the Messiah. *Heavenly Father, as this dear child of yours studies Stephen’s example of a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life, let her see the truth in the gift of the Holy Spirit instilled in her heart as well. Amen.*



Read Acts 6:8-15 and answer the following questions.

What does verse 8 tell us about Stephen?

With whom did an argument break out?

What does this tell us about the believers this episode of Acts is focused on? Are they Hellenist or Hebraic Jews?

What does verse 10 tell us about Stephen’s argument?

What approach did the Jews of the Hellenist synagogue take next? (v.11 and 12)

Where was Stephen taken for trial?

What charge was brought against Stephen?

What demeanor did Stephen present and the Sanhedrin witness when he was brought before the court?



What does such a demeanor imply?

The Synagogue of Freedmen in Jerusalem was a Hellenist synagogue of Jews from three different regions. Cyrene and Alexandria are in North Africa; Cilicia is the region from which Saul comes, along the southern coast of modern-day Turkey; while Asia is a reference to the western part of modern-day Turkey, Ephesus being its capital in the time of Luke's writing.

The men from the Hellenist synagogue, when they could not defeat Stephen's argument turned toward underhanded tactics. The NIV tells us they "secretly persuaded" others to spread the rumors of Stephen blaspheming Moses and God. The translation "secretly persuaded" does not carry the weight of the original Greek meaning of *hypoballō* which means to "suborn", "in the legal sense is to procure a person who will take a false oath."² These made up charges were spread about town as we see described in verse 12, "*So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law*". These men insured that the people in Jerusalem would turn against Stephen, the elders of the synagogue and likely the temple would hear of Stephen's so-called blasphemy, and the teachers of the law, the Sadducees³, would hear of it as well. Stephen was set up from the beginning to take a fall and turn the tide against the followers of Jesus.

When Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, it is not the rumored blasphemy for which he is on trial but a greater crime of calling for the destruction of the temple – the dwelling place of God – and alteration of the Law: "*Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us*" (v.14). Stephen had been a faithful witness to the teachings of Jesus. In rejecting Stephen's teaching, Jesus' teachings are rejected. With the rejection of Stephen's testimony (both in the synagogue and in court), the Jews are in fact rejecting Jesus the Messiah, again.

Upon the charges against Stephen being announced, the gathering turns to Stephen whose "*face was like the face of an angel*" (v.15). This description reflects not only the utter faith in his belief that Jesus is the Messiah; but also points to the inspiration for his defense in the verses to come: the Holy Spirit. This little description should be viewed in connection with the vision of heaven and Jesus at the right hand of God in 7:55. Both instances reveal a divine presence in the midst of human events.

The First Martyr

Our previous passage reveals quite clearly the intention of some of the Jews in Jerusalem to frame Stephen for blasphemy, calling for the destruction of the temple and changing the traditions handed down by Moses, all of which were unsubstantiated lies based on false witness. Our passage today consists of Stephen's speech in his own defense and the outcome of the hearing before the Sanhedrin. It is a long passage, but we will only be focusing on the last portion in detail. Before you begin today's scripture passage, take a few minutes to pray that the Lord will open his Word to you.



Read Acts 7:1-59 and answer the following questions.

² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

³ The Sanhedrin is comprised of two factions, the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Stephen spends a long time detailing aspects of Israel's history in order to develop three themes.

What consistent pattern in Israel's history does Stephen point out using Joseph (v.9-16), Moses (v. 17-39) and Jesus (v.51-52)?

What do the experiences of these men share in common regarding their influence among the people of Israel?

Why did Israel obstinately refuse to listen to the men God sent to them? (v. 9, 39-42, 51-53)

The Jews came to revere the temple itself as the holiest place on earth and the physical location of God's interaction with man. What did Stephen reveal about God's dealings with man throughout the history of Israel?

What does the following quote (originally from Isaiah 66:1-2) mean in the context used by Stephen in verse 49-50? "*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?*"

🔥 How are the members of the Sanhedrin like their fathers? How do they resist the Holy Spirit? (v.51-53)

What was the response of the Sanhedrin?

What / who did Stephen claim to see?

What happened next?

Who are we told is present at the stoning of Stephen and what does 8:1 say about him?

In Galatians 1:13-14 Paul speaks about his former actions during the time subsequent to Stephen's death. What does Paul say about himself? What do you think he means by "*I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age*"?

What was Stephen's final act? What is the sin to which Stephen refers in Acts 7:60?

Stephen, in the longest recorded speech in Acts, skillfully points out not only the errors in the Jews thinking regarding the temple and God, but also very powerfully accuses the Sanhedrin of the very things they had accused Stephen. The Jews had perverted the Law to the benefit of their own power, abused the temple system to increase their wealth, and blasphemed God by their rejection of His messiah. It is no wonder they responded with fury and, using the very descriptive phrase, "*gnashed their teeth at him*". The word translated as "fury" in the NIV comes from the Greek word *diapriō*⁴, which means "*to cut to the heart*". Stephen's words had spoken truth to their hearts, they recognized the truth to his words, but unable to accept it they still persisted in their rejection of truth. In fury they growled like a hungry pack of wolves ready to devour their prey.

Stephen's response to their fury incited them even more when he claimed, "*I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*"(v.56). Claiming to see the Son of Man harkens to the prophetic visions of Daniel 7:13-14 where he sees the Son of Man standing at the throne of the Ancient of Days (God Almighty) in the heavenly throne room. According to the New American Commentary,

"The primary role of the Danielic Son of Man was that of judgment, and the New Testament consistently depicts Christ in this role of eschatological judge (cf. Matt 25:31-46). The standing position may thus depict the exalted Christ in his role of judge. If so, Stephen's vision not only confirmed his testimony, but it showed Christ rising to render judgment on his accusers. They, not he, were the guilty parties."

Furthermore, in Daniel 7:14 Christ is given dominion over "*all peoples, nations and men of every language*" implying that God is not bound to one nation or people, but is sovereign over the world. Christ's reign knows no boundary as we will see as the word is soon taken beyond the geographic boundary of Israel. Through Stephen's vision into the throne room of God Almighty we see Jesus standing in judgment over these proceedings.

Because the Sanhedrin could not accept the truth proclaimed by Stephen, the only course of action was to believe his vision to be blasphemous. In outrage they descended upon him like blood thirsty wolves, dragged him out beyond the city gates and stoned him to death. As Stephen's story ends, Luke introduces us to Saul who approved of the stoning of this man of faith. While Luke's narrative does not go into detail of how involved Saul was in the hearing before the Sanhedrin, it is possible to conjecture his presence and participation in the events leading up to it. We know Saul (later Paul) was a Greek speaking Jew from the region of Cilicia, it is *possible* he may have been a member of the

⁴ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

Hellenist synagogue in Jerusalem where Stephen debated his beliefs with those members who sought his destruction. Verse 8:1 makes it apparent that he was present to give his approval and consent for Stephen's stoning – the sentence mandated for blasphemy⁵. It is clear from Acts 22:20 that Paul was greatly affected by the stoning of Stephen. Perhaps he had heard Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin and Stephen's last prayer was answered by God in Paul's later conversion and zealous evangelism.

Personal Reflection

In what ways do you see the presence of the Holy Spirit in our scripture passage today? How does the Spirit's presence manifest itself?

Sowing the Seed

With Stephen we have reached a major turning point in our story in Acts. Up until this point the local Jewish leaders at the temple had been restrained in their persecution of the infant church. That restraint came in the form of the small band's popularity with the general population in Jerusalem. With Stephen's story we see the power of the Sanhedrin at its fullest and most violent. Prior to Stephen's arrest we witnessed their being limited to warning the Christians about preaching in the name of Jesus (4:21) and then later flogging the apostles (5:40) for their persistence in preaching and healing in the name of Jesus. With Stephen we see all out persecution erupting not only with the Sanhedrin, but the Hellenist Jews in the crowd as they join in with the stoning of Stephen. This stoning results in the Hellenist Christians fleeing from Jerusalem into Samaria and Palestine. With the death of Stephen, Luke's narrative also departs from Jerusalem.

Our scripture passage for today takes us out of Israel and into Samaria, just as the Lord had ordained in the beginning of Acts. *Heavenly Father, as this child of yours continues to study your word so diligently, bless her with understanding and insight into your ways and the movement of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*



Read Acts 8:1b-40 and answer the following questions.

What happened the day of Stephen's murder?

⁵ It is questionable that the Sanhedrin had the permission to carry out that sentence subject to Roman authority as these events played out in rapid succession.

What did Saul do?

In the following verses what does Paul confess about himself?

- 1 Corinthians 15:9
- Galatians 1:13-14
- Philippians 3:4b-6

🔥 From these descriptions what do you imagine Saul and the other religious leaders to be like in their persecution of the Hellenist Christians?

Philip⁶ previously mentioned in Acts 6:5 as one of the seven Greek believers chosen to minister to the Greek widows, goes to Samaria. What does he do there?

What was the result of Philip's work in Samaria?

What happened when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria accepted the word of God?

Why do you think the Holy Spirit didn't immediately descend upon the new believers upon their conversion as it did for the Jewish converts (subsequent to Pentecost)?

⁶ Had this Philip been one of the Twelve Apostles it would not have been necessary for Peter and John to come pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon the new believers in Samaria, Philip would have been able to do so himself.

Who was Simon the Sorcerer?

What was Peter's response to Simon's request in verses 20-23?

To what sin do you think Simon was still captive?

As the persecution swept through Jerusalem the Hellenists dispersed or scattered throughout Judea and Samaria carrying the gospel with them. Philip travels into Samaria to the city of Samaria preaching, healing and performing miraculous signs to the amazement of the crowds there. The signs and healings, done in the power of the Holy Spirit and the name of Christ, authenticate the preaching of Philip. We learn that there was great joy in the city because of his healings and his teaching.

Now in that city was a man named Simon⁷ who for a long time had amazed the people with his sorcery or magic. This man held power and influence among the people and was paid for his “magical” abilities to heal or help those who sought his aid. He used sorcery to work wonders, perform healings and exorcisms and practiced astrology. Magicians were common throughout the Middle East and were either charlatans or were under the influence of evil spirits.⁸ Simon had become well known and revered for his ability to the point that he had a large following and many believed he was *“the divine power known as the Great Power”* (v. 10), in other words he was believed to be the Messiah! It is plain to see that his power did not come from God.

Simon was so impressed by Philip's “magic” that he too believed and was baptized. But Simon's faith comes into question when Peter and John arrive. He appears more impressed with wielding the power of the Holy Spirit than having had a true conversion of faith. Peter rebukes him severely. Simon's heart was not right before God, his behavior was wicked and his thinking was evil. Peter said he was full of bitterness and held captive by sin. Peter discerned that Simon had not genuinely come to faith in the saving power of Jesus and that an internal spiritual conflict had not been resolved. Simon still desired his own glorification through wielding spiritual (magical) power than recognizing it is Christ who saves and heals. Pride still ran rampant in the heart of Simon! He was still held captive by his sin rather than being freed from it by submitting himself to the authority of God. Apparently terrified by Peter's rebuke, Simon asks Peter to pray for him. It is hard to tell if Peter's rebuke had its intended spiritual result of a changed heart, or if Simon simply feared the consequences of insulting these “powerful” men. At any rate, Simon didn't pray for himself. Simon becomes for us a model of one who participates on the fringe of religion but never fully commits oneself using religion as a means to avoid bad consequences rather than receiving the benefits of a personal relationship with Jesus.

⁷ There was a legendary figure called Simon Magus who may have been this Simon. Justin Martyr, who was a Samaritan Christian, said Simon lived in Samaria and later moved to Rome.—Life Application Bible Commentary (LABC)

⁸ See Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9 – LABC

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

When Peter and John heard of the conversions in Samaria they were sent as apostolic representatives to determine whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers. It was difficult for them to fully embrace the idea Samaritans (half-Jews) could enter into the kingdom (despite having witnessed Jesus' ministry to the Samaritans! See John 4). There had been a long history of hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews viewed Samaritans as tainted and impure while the Samaritans despised the Jews for their self-righteous arrogance. When the apostles saw the authenticity of the Samaritans' conversion, the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit in what becomes known as the Samaritan Pentecost. With the out pouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans no longer could it be denied that Jesus' message of salvation was for all peoples, everywhere. With a "Samaritan Pentecost" paralleling step by step the Pentecost of the Jews, a definitive sign was given that Gentiles could receive the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The delay of the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit until the apostles were present could be attributed to the fact that this historic event had to be witnessed by the apostles. The presence – especially of Peter and John, was necessary for the rest of the church in Jerusalem to be willing to accept the Samaritans into the Church. Peter and John could testify to the church in Jerusalem that God indeed was moving among the Samaritans just as he was moving among the Jews. These Samaritans could no longer be viewed as the "half-blood" half-brethren of the Jews. If they were acceptable to God, as testified by the Holy Spirit, then they were equal to the Jews in the eyes of God.

With the conversion of the Samaritans, God's plan of bringing salvation to the world had taken its first step. The forced dispersion of the Greek believers taught that the believers were not to wait for the world to come to them, but that they must go to the world. Peter and John witnessed that evangelism required the gospel be carried beyond Israel and that God's plan would not be accomplished if the apostles remained in Jerusalem.

Personal Reflection

As we progress through Acts we will see the Holy Spirit descend upon believers in different ways – some with the laying on of apostolic hands and sometimes before the apostles even arrive on the scene. Why do you think that maybe? What do you think God is revealing about the Holy Spirit?