

# ACTS

Lesson 6

October 18, 2023



# STEPHEN

Acts 6:1-8:3

# Setting the Scene—Who, Where, When, What, Why?

- Yerushalayim...Jerusalem about 35 AD, under rule of the Roman Empire; Jerusalem was the epicenter of the earth for Jewish people for thousands of years; the Holy Land; it was a p of transition for the Christian church
- Jewish Christians depended upon one another as practical and necessary for survival.
- The early Christian church was experiencing rapid growth—and complaints. There was a current complaint before the leaders; it was becoming difficult to serve so many and please all
- Organization was needed, and the religious leaders decided to add seven Deacons and divide needed tasks. Stephen was chosen as the first Deacon and manager.

## SETTING THE SCENE, cont'd

KEY PEOPLE: STEPHEN, PHILIP, PETER, PAUL, BARNABAS, the APOSTLES, CAIAPHAS and the COUNCIL, BELIEVERS FROM AFAR, THE ANGRY MOB, AND...SAUL

You might think that this is a sad book with a tragic end...but things are not always as they seem...

KEY IDEA: IT TAKES ONLY ONE, FILLED WITH BOLDNESS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WILLING TO ENDURE OPPOSITION, TO BECOME A CATALYST FOR THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY.

# WHAT'S AHEAD...

NEXT WE WILL CONSIDER:

CHOOSING SEVEN DEACONS

THE ARREST AND DEFENSE

MARTYRDOM

CLOSURE—APPLICATION

BUT...FIRST A "SPOILER" ...

# BUT...FIRST A 'SPOILER'

OF COURSE, WE ARE TALKING ABOUT STEPHEN.

STEPHEN MET HIS EARLY DEATH BY STONING !!

WHAT KIND OF PERSON WOULD HURL STONES AT SUCH AN INNOCENT? IT WASN'T JUST A SINGLE PERSON, BUT AN ANGRY, MALICIOUS MOB—WITH MURDER ON THEIR COLLECTIVE MINDS!

WHAT INCITED THEIR MALICIOUS ANGER? HOW HAD STEPHEN GOTTEN HIMSELF IN THIS POSITION?

HAVE YOU EVER HAD STONES HURLED AT YOU???

# RESPONDING TO THE COMPLAINT

THE HELLENIST COMPLAINED THAT “THEIR WIDOWS WERE NOT RECEIVING THEIR SHARE OF THE DAILY DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD.”

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONVENED AND DECIDED TO ADD SEVEN DEACONS TO HELP SPREAD THE WORK, FOR “IT WASN’T RIGHT FOR THEM TO GIVE UP THEIR PRAYERS AND PREACHING TO SERVE TABLES.” (6;2)

“BROTHERS, SELECT FROM AMONG YOU SEVEN MEN OF GOOD REPUTE, FULL OF THE SPIRIT AND OF WISDOM.” (6;3)

## DECONS: DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS

DEACONS WERE EXPECTED TO BE SELF-CONTROLLED IN SPEECH, APETITES, AND ACTIONS (1 TIM 3:8, 3:11). THEY WERE TO BE DIGNIFIED, NOT DOUBLE-TONGUED, NOT ADDICTED TO MUCH WINE, NOT GREEDY FOR DISHONORED GAIN [PAUL}.

IN ACTS, THE DISCIPLES WERE WANTING MEN OF GOOD REPUTE, FULL OF SPIRIT, AND WISE. (ACTS 6.1)

‘DEACON’ from GREEK, ‘diakonos’ - meaning ‘helper’- third ranked member of the church hierarchy: BISHOP - PRIEST - DEACON - a servant to the church.

‘A revered role, as we know that Jesus came to serve, not to be served.



# STEPHEN'S CHARACTER

WE DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT STEPHEN, BASICALLY ONLY HIS LAST DAY ON EARTH. WE KNOW ONE THING ABOUT: HIS PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, HIS REPUTATION, HIS CHRISTIAN BELIEFS, HIS POWER IN THE CHURCH, HIS INTELLECT...ALL ELSE, WE DEDUCE FROM THIS.

“”He had a face like the face of an angel.” He was of good repute. He was full of the Spirit. He had reached a powerful position in the church. He was full of wisdom.. Could there be a more perfect man for the position of Deacon!

STEPHEN WAS CHOSEN AS THE FIRST OF THE NEW DEACONS, AS THE MANAGER. Stephen was a Hellenist, and more liberal than most. The Hellenist was a splinter group of Judaism before Christ; they were anti-temple and anti-ritualistic bias.

## STEPHEN IS ARRESTED AND IMPRISONED

THE NEW DEACON WAS A POWERFUL SPEAKER, AND WAS DOING GOOD WORKS AND SIGNS. BUT, HE HAD ENEMIES—THE FREEDMEN, AND MEN OF THE SYNAGOGUE, THE SANHEDRIN. THEY COULD NOT BEST HIM IN DEBATE, AND BEGAN PLOTTING AGAINST HIM.

THEY STIRRED UP THE COMMUNITY AND SPREAD LIES, ACCUSING DEACON STEPHEN OF BLASPHEMY AGAINST MOSES AND THE TEMPLE. HE WAS BROUGHT BEFORE THE COUNCIL TO DEFEND HIMSELF, {6:13-14}

# THE COUNCIL - THE SANHEDRIN

Sanhedrin - from Greek 'synedrine - "sitting together"

An ancient Jewish judicial body, started by Moses. Headed by High Priest and having religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction.(Merriam Webster) Composed of wealthy Sadducees and some middle class Pharisees, they were well informed in the Old Testament. They took issue with Stephen's more progressive "Hellenistic" ideas.

Stephen's preaching that Jesus will destroy the Temple and change the laws of Moses infuriated them, among other of his pronouncements.



# SPECIFIC CHARGES FOR THE ARREST

THE PLOTTING AND LIES INCLUDED CHARGES OF:

DEACON STEPHEN BLASPHEMIED AGAINST MOSES AND WANTED TO CHANGE THE LAWS OF MOSES

DEACON STEPHEN WAS AGAINST BUILDING THE TEMPLE, AND WANTED TO MOVE IT FROM SACRED GROUND

STEPHEN BLASPHEMIED “THIS HOLY PLACE” (6:13) [tou hagiou topou toutou] is a reference to the land and the Temple. (from Dennis McCallum, “Strange Details in Stephen’s Defense”)



# STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

How would you begin your defense, if you were Stephen? And Stephen begins..."BROTHERS, AND FATHERS, HEAR ME." (7:1) AND THEN HE PROCEEDS WITH A LENGTHY JEWISH HISTORY REVIEW, STARTING WITH ABRAHAM.

'THE GOD OF GLORY APPEARED TO OUR FATHER ABRAHAM...' (7:2)

...and proceeds through historical facts to a BOLD ACCUSATION!!

OH MY! WHAT A DEFENSE IT WAS! MUCH DEBATED BY BIBLICAL SCHOLARS, AND FOUND CONFUSING! THE MIDDLE SEEMS TOTALLY UNRELATED TO ANY DEFENSE; BUT RATHER SEEMS FOCUSED ON GEOGRAPHY AND SACRED SPACE!? WHAT WAS HE TRYING TO DO?

# STEPHEN DID NOT REALLY DEFEND HIMSELF

HE ACCUSED THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF FAILING TO OBEY GOD'S LAWS. (7:2)

HE POINTED OUT THAT GOD HAD ALWAYS KEPT HIS COVENANT PROMISES, BUT THAT ISRAEL HAD FAILED TIME AND TIME AGAIN TO UPHOLD ITS END. (7:8) The Pharisees were strict keepers of the law—God's law and the many laws they added.

STEPHEN WAS NOT AGAINST THE TEMPLE, BUT KNEW THAT GOD WAS MORE IMPORTANT, AND THAT "GOD DID NOT DWELL ONLY IN A HOUSE OF WORSHIP, BUT WHEREVER HEARTS OF FAITH ARE OPEN TO RECEIVE HIM." (Isaiah 66:1-2)

STEPHEN WAS ACCUSED OF B L A S P H E M Y !!!

BLASPHEMY IS A GRAVE ACCUSATION; THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN !! (see Matthew 31-32)

"Blasphemy" from Ancient Greek meaning an ill-omened utterance. (Smith's Bible Dictionary}

## RESPONSE TO STEPHEN'S SPEECH

“NOW WHEN THE COUNCIL HEARD THESE THINGS, THEY WERE ENRAGED AND THEY GROUND THEIR TEETH AT HIM.” (7:54)

THE COUNCIL MEMBERS COULD NOT STAND TO HAVE THEIR EVIL MOTIVES EXPOSED, AS STEPHEN MADE POWERFUL ACCUSATIONS THAT STUNG HIS LISTENERS

WHEN STEPHEN SAID “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” THEY CRIED OUT...AND RUSHED AT HIM. (7:56-57)

THEY CAST HIM OUT OF THE CITY AND STONED HIM. (7:58) (This law-abiding group failed to obey the law and usurped the legal process.)

# STEPHEN'S MARTYRDOM

STEPHEN BECAME THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR OF THE GOSPEL.

'MARTYR' from Greek 'martyr' or 'witness'; to Latin mactor, to Old English martyr

Essentially meaning one who sacrifices their life or something of great value for the sake of principle;

Spiritual meaning: anyone who voluntarily suffers death rather than deny their religion by word or deed.

“AND AS THEY WERE STONING HIM, HE CALLED OUT, ‘LORD JESUS, RECEIVE MY SPIRIT...LORD, DO NOT HOLD THIS SIN AGAINST THEM.’” (7:59-60)

(What does this remind you of?)



## REACTIONS of the CHURCH, APOSTLES, and OTHERS

And WITNESSES LAID DOWN THEIR GARMENTS AT THE FEET OF A YOUNG MAN NAMED...S A U L” .(7:58)”... “AND SAUL APPROVED OF THE EXECUTION, (8:1)

And THERE AROSE THAT DAY A GREAT PERSECUTION AGAINST THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM,” (8:1) BUT, THE CHURCH CONTINUED TO GROW.

And “THEY WERE ALL SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE REGION OF JUDEA AND SAMARIA, EXCEPT THE APOSTLES.” (8:1)

And SAUL CONTINUED TO RAVAGE THE CHURCH, HOMES, AND DRAG PEOPLE OFF TO PRISON. (8:2)

# CLOSURE–APPLICATION

KEY THOUGHT APPLIED TO US...A STONE IN A POND

IT TAKES ONLY ONE! “THE WORD OF GOD SPREAD LIKE RIPPLES IN A POND,” (6:7) LIKE A STONE THROWN IN A POND, WAVES RIPPLE OUT TOUCHING OTHER WAVES, AND SPREADING IN ALL DIRECTIONS..

EACH PERSON HAS A VITAL PART TO PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHANGE THE WORLD SINGLE-HANDEDLY; IT IS ENOUGH TO BE PART OF THE WAVE TOUCHING THOSE AROUND YOU...AND THAT IS SIGNIFICANT; GOD WANTS TO USE EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US AS HIS WITNESS.

OUR CHALLENGE: ARE YOU COMFORTABLE SPEAKING OUT BOLDLY ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST JESUS? ARE YOU LIKE A STONE IN THE POND, SPEAKING OUT AND TOUCHING OTHERS WITH THE GOSPEL?

# A STONE IN A POND...IT TAKES ONLY ONE

Let us get back to the stones you are passing around...

They are not stones...but fossilized coral, 350 million years old, tightly-packed, hexagon shaped prehistoric corals (now called Petoskey Stones in Michigan...)

Things are not always as they seem with Stephen's death by stoning, as it began the persecution of the church and it scattered the disciples geographically, thereby quickly spreading the Gospel. God has His plan...and His timing! Let us pray.



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## ACTS 6.1-8.3 'STEPHEN' References:

1. ACTS Workbook-Textbook (The Village Church)
2. NASB Life Application Study Bible (Zondervan)
3. What's the Bible All About? (H. Mears)
4. Gospel on the Ground (K. McClelland)
5. Smith's Bible Dictionary
6. Merriam-Webster Dictionary
7. Various Maps
8. [Cited in ref] "Strange Details in Stephen's Defense" (D. McCallum)