

# ***The Book of Acts***

## ***The First Church Leaders***

Lesson #4 for July 28, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 6; 7; 8:4-25; Hebrews 5:11-14; Micah 6:1-16.

1. Whenever God's work is moving forward rapidly, the Devil will do everything he can to disrupt progress. Acts 6:7 and Acts 15:5 point out that even many of the priests (Sadducees) and Pharisees were becoming Christian believers.
2. Many of the new converts after the time of Pentecost and over the next three and one-half years were Hellenistic Jews. That means that they were Jews whose primary language was Greek and who had probably been born and raised outside of Judea or Galilee. Many of them were then living in or around Jerusalem. (Acts 2:5,9-11) There was a noticeable difference between those Hellenistic Jews and the Judean Jews otherwise known as the "Hebrews" referred to in Acts 6. Remember that the original Hebrew language was virtually a dead language, used only by scholars of the Scriptures. Since the Babylonian captivity, Aramaic, a close relative of Hebrew, was the language spoken in Galilee and Judea.
3. Why do you think a Jew having been born and raised outside of Judea would return to live near Jerusalem later in life? Would it be possible for someone like that to live comfortably in Judea or Galilee without speaking Aramaic, the national language at that time?
4. Can you think of any examples of people who were born and raised outside of Judea but were later living there? Why did they go back to Judea or even Jerusalem?
5. Paul himself had moved back to Jerusalem, first for educational reasons and, later, for spiritual and political reasons as a member of the Sanhedrin.

**Acts 26:9-11:** <sup>9</sup> "I myself thought that I should do everything I could against the cause of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> That is what I did in Jerusalem. I received authority from the chief priests and put many of God's people in prison; and when they were sentenced to death, I also voted against them. <sup>11</sup> Many times I had them punished in the synagogues and tried to make them deny their faith. I was so furious with them that I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Acts 26:9–11). New York: American Bible Society.

6. Paul had a sister who was, no doubt, raised in Tarsus as Paul was. When Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, apparently his sister was living there, presumably with her family. She may also have gone to Jerusalem for an education although that is much less likely since women usually did not get a formal education in those days. She probably was married to a Jew who chose to live in Jerusalem for some reason. It is also possible that Paul's nephew was in Jerusalem for an education while his family lived elsewhere. Look at the story of Paul's nephew recorded in Acts 23:12-18.
7. Barnabas also was a Jew, a Levite from Cyprus, who lived in Jerusalem. (Acts 4:36-37)
8. Later, Barnabas moved to Antioch in Syria to help spread the gospel. (Acts 13:1) It was from there that he went to Tarsus to call Paul to come and help them in that work. Paul and Barnabas became the first ordained missionaries sent to the Gentiles.
9. What do you think? Would those Hellenistic Jews who had had considerable experience living among Gentiles be more ready to accept non-Jewish converts to Christianity? They differed from the Judean and Galilean Jews culturally and to a certain extent religiously.

They were not so bound by Judean Jewish traditions, and they had had less experience in the temple itself and its ceremonies. Can you name several very important Hellenistic Jews?

10. The Sadducees and many other Jews felt that they would be better off if they just integrated into the Roman Empire and adopted Roman customs. As part of that integration, there was a large amphitheater and a horse racing track within the walls of Jerusalem in those days.
11. With that background in mind, read Acts 6 and realize that a misunderstanding had arisen between the Greek-speaking Jews and the Aramaic-speaking Jews of Palestine. The question was about whether or not the widows of the two groups were being treated fairly.

The cause of complaint was an alleged neglect of the Greek widows in the daily distribution of assistance. Any inequality would have been contrary to the spirit of the gospel, yet Satan had succeeded in arousing suspicion. Prompt measures now must be taken to remove all occasion for dissatisfaction, lest the enemy triumph in his effort to bring about a division among the believers.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles\** 88.1.

12. So, what should be done? We do not know at what point in the three and one-half years between the Pentecost and the stoning of Stephen that the deacons were chosen. A careful reading of Acts 6:1-4 with attention to the Greek behind these passages makes it clear that both the apostles and the deacons were “ministering” to the Christians. One group was to minister by the Word and prayer, and the other was to minister through the practical aspects of “serving tables” and dealing with the finances of the group.
13. The two words describing what the apostles did in contrast to what the deacons did are actually from the same root word; the only real difference in the ministry was what their primary responsibilities were.
14. Read Acts 5:42; 2:42,46. If the number of believers had swollen to more than 5000, how did the deacons minister to them without an official organization? How did they share meals? Did they spread out, working in many different homes? Were they going house-to-house to spread the gospel? Or, were they, on occasions, inviting friends to their own homes to hear the gospel?
15. From reading the stories of Stephen and Philip as recorded later in Acts, it is clear that the deacons were very effective apostles and missionaries just as the disciples were.
16. Read Acts 6:2-6. Notice that the deacons were chosen because they were “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” It is interesting to notice that all the names of the deacons were Greek or Latin in origin, rather than Hebrew or Aramaic.
17. So, what does it mean by the term *to serve tables*? Notice this interesting description from *The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament*:

**5132. trápeza; gen. trapézes**, fem. noun from *tétra* (n.f., see *tetrágonos* [5068]), four, and *péza* (n.f., see *péde* [3976]), a foot. A table:

(I) Generally the place for setting food or taking meals....

(B) Metonymically for that which is set on a table, food, a meal, banquet (Acts 16:34, meaning he set a table, made ready a meal). See *paratíthemi* (3908), to put or set before. See also Rom. 11:9 quoted from Ps. 69:23; 1 Cor. 10:21; Sept.: Ps. 23:5; Prov. 9:2.

(II) Specifically the table of a money changer, a broker’s bench or counter at which he sat in the market or public place, e.g., in the outer court of the

temple (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15). See *kermatistēs* (2773), a changer of money, and *kollubistēs* (2855), a coin-dealer. Hence, generally, a broker's office or bank where money is deposited and loaned out (Luke 19:23). The word is used with this meaning in Gr. In Acts 6:2, used metonymically for serving.

Deriv.: *trapezites* (5133), banker, moneychanger, broker.—Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.\* Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

18. Do we have any issues facing the church today that might lead to dissension? What things could be done to rectify those problems in our day?
19. Although, as a general rule, the Sadducees and Pharisees were the major opponents to the spread of the gospel in Judea and Galilee, obviously, a number of them had been convinced that Christianity was the truth; they chose to join the disciples. Some of them became leaders among the believers. Paul is an obvious example.
20. Why do you think it took three and one-half years before the Christian church began to spread out from Jerusalem?
21. Read Acts 6:8-15. Stephen must have been a remarkable man. His name suggests that he had a Greek background. Verse 9 suggests that he primarily dealt with two groups of what may have been primarily ex-slaves, one group from the southern territories of Cyrene (Libya today) and Alexandria and the other group from the northern territories of Cilicia and Asia Minor which is now Turkey.
22. His arguments in favor of Christianity were so powerful that no one could answer him. In order to understand the charges raised against Stephen, we need to understand that according to Jewish tradition, there were three pillars upon which all matters rested: 1) The law, 2) The temple services, and 3) Good works. By suggesting that the temple was not God's ultimate dwelling place or place of ministry, Stephen was attacking one of the most sacred beliefs of the Jews of Jerusalem. That is why he was charged with blasphemy.
23. There is no doubt that the accusations against Stephen were largely fabricated. But, as in the case of Jesus Himself, (Mark 14:58; John 2:19) Stephen's speech against the temple as it was perceived by the Sanhedrin revealed that he had a better understanding of the future of the Jewish nation than they did. Did Stephen's speech indicate that he understood that the temple would soon be destroyed?
24. Clearly, Stephen had adopted a new paradigm. He was no longer bound by the traditional Jewish understanding of things. **Why is it so much harder to abandon formerly-held ideas or doctrines than it is to adopt a totally new one?**
25. Read Acts 7:44-53. After reviewing much of the history of the Jewish nation, Stephen came to the place where he was talking about the first temple built by Solomon. Stephen and all those others present recognized that Solomon's Temple had been totally demolished at the time of the Babylonian conquests. But, they spoke of the second temple (known as Herod's Temple) which they felt was God's house as if it were sacred. However, Stephen realized that "the Most High God does not live in houses built by human hands." (Acts 7:48, *GNB*\*) Then, he quoted Isaiah 66:1-2 to prove his point. God cannot be limited to our small human habitations. But, because of respect for the temple, this was terrible heresy to his listeners.
26. Stephen realized he was making his audience angry. So, he rushed to the conclusion of his sermon, comparing the current Sanhedrin to those who had killed the prophets in the times

of the Old Testament. By raising his voice and speaking out against the sins of the current generation, Stephen had taken up the role of a prophet. Stephen realized that his life would not last much longer.

27. When necessary, are we willing to stand up for the truth even in the face of fierce opposition? Speaking for God as a prophet, Stephen went on to speak the words in Acts 7:55-56. Notice Ellen White's comments.

When Stephen reached this point, there was a tumult among the people. When he connected Christ with the prophecies and spoke as he did of the temple, the priest, pretending to be horror-stricken, rent his robe. To Stephen this act was a signal that his voice would soon be silenced forever. He saw the resistance that met his words and knew that he was giving his last testimony. Although in the midst of his sermon, he abruptly concluded it.

Suddenly breaking away from the train of history that he was following, and turning upon his infuriated judges, he cried: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it." [Acts 7:51-53]

At this, priests and rulers were beside themselves with anger. Acting more like beasts of prey than human beings, they rushed upon Stephen, gnashing their teeth. In the cruel faces about him the prisoner read his fate; but he did not waver. For him the fear of death was gone. For him the enraged priests and the excited mob had no terror. The scene before him faded from his vision. To him the gates of heaven were ajar, and, looking in, he saw the glory of the courts of God, and Christ, as if just risen from His [101] throne, standing ready to sustain His servant. In words of triumph Stephen exclaimed, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." [Acts 7:56]

As he described the glorious scene upon which his eyes were gazing, it was more than his persecutors could endure. Stopping their ears, that they might not hear his words, and uttering loud cries, they ran furiously upon him with one accord "and cast him out of the city." "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

**No legal sentence had been passed upon Stephen, but the Roman authorities were bribed by large sums of money to make no investigation into the case.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 100.1-101.2; *LHU*\* 104.5; *3SP*\* 298.1. [Bold type and Bible references in brackets are added.]

28. Read Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31. In each of these previous sermons, there had been a call to repentance. However, there was no call to repentance in Stephen's speech even though it is the longest one recorded in the book of Acts.
29. Read Acts 7:57-8:2. While Stephen was being judged unfairly by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, looking up to heaven, he saw in vision the day when those very judges would

stand before the judgment seat of God. It was at this point in time with the stoning of Stephen that Paul began to struggle with his conscience. Eventually, Saul/Paul became the most outstanding apostle for the Christian church.

30. It is not clear whether Stephen was ever officially sentenced to death for blasphemy or was simply lynched by a crowd of fanatics. In any case, he is the first recorded believer to be killed because of his faith in Jesus. That, of course, is overlooking the story of John the Baptist. But, when Stephen looked up to heaven and prayed for his persecutors, he was praying for Saul as well. By this act, Stephen became the first Christian martyr.
31. Whatever the circumstances, the stoning of Stephen ignited a massive persecution against the Christian believers in and around Jerusalem. From what we can read, it seems that Saul was the leader of that persecution and a member of the Sanhedrin. (Acts 8:3; 26:10)
32. But, God used evil to produce good. Read Romans 8:28. The believers were scattered out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. We read in Acts 8:4-25 about the results. Such a remarkable work was carried on in Samaria by Philip that Peter and John had to go there to see what was happening. When they arrived, they wanted the Samaritans to receive the same blessing they had received at Pentecost. So, they prayed for the new believers, placed their hands on them, and they, in turn, received the Holy Spirit—as the disciples did at Pentecost. (Acts 8:14-17) The great work of spreading the gospel outside of Jerusalem to the ends of the world had begun in earnest.
33. Read Acts 8:26-39. In a vision, Philip was called to go on the road toward Gaza where he met an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading as he traveled along. The eunuch invited Philip up into his chariot to help him understand. Before long, they had covered many points. They came upon some water, and the Ethiopian asked if he could be baptized. After the baptism, Philip was carried miraculously to the coastline of the Mediterranean, and he preached in all the cities along the coast all the way back to Caesarea Maritima. What do you think was accomplished by this brief experience.

The persecution that came upon the church in Jerusalem resulted in giving a great impetus to the work of the gospel. Success had attended the ministry of the word in that place, and there was danger that the disciples would linger there too long, unmindful of the Saviour's commission to go to all the world. Forgetting that strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service, they began to think that they had no work so important as that of shielding the church in Jerusalem from the attacks of the enemy. Instead of educating the new converts to carry the gospel to those who had not heard it, they were in danger of taking a course that would lead all to be satisfied with what had been accomplished. **To scatter His representatives abroad, where they could work for others, God permitted persecution to come upon them. Driven from Jerusalem, the believers "went everywhere preaching the word."**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 105.2. [Bold type is added.]

Could such a thing happen in our day?

34. In our churches today, who should be responsible for caring for the flock? Who should be responsible for spreading the gospel? (AA 110.2) Each of us has our responsibilities, and everyone should be seeking for ways to tell the truth to those around them. This is a work that cannot be left just to the pastors. Will God need to send persecution to motivate us?
35. What is your own experience in spreading the gospel? Have you had the wonderful privilege

of bringing someone from outside the church to come to know Jesus better?

36. It has been estimated by some scholars that by the time Stephen was stoned, there were about 20,000 Christian believers living in and around Jerusalem. They came from two groups about whom we already know, the Greek-speaking Jews and the Hebrew-or-Aramaic-speaking Jews. The suggestion that the disciples presented to the Christian group which led to the choosing of those seven deacons was certainly God-inspired. How many of the solutions that we suggest to problems that we have in the church today lead to large increases in membership and growth of the church? How many are God-inspired?
37. Was there any special power imparted to the deacons by the “laying on of hands”? (Acts 6:6) Do we know about the future of any of those deacons other than Stephen and Philip?
38. Interestingly enough, some have suggested that the Nikolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2:6,14 might have been followers of Nikolaus, one of the seven deacons. This, of course, cannot be proven.
39. Dr. Luke, himself a Greek, spoke in glowing terms about Stephen. (Acts 6:3-15; Acts 7) Where do you think Stephen was during the ministry of Jesus Himself? What led Stephen to become a man full of the Holy Spirit, faith, wisdom, grace, and power? He was also known as a person of prayer, miracles, truth, light, and forgiveness. Would he have served well as one of the disciples? Or, would he have been rejected by the disciples because he was not an Aramaic-speaking Hebrew?
40. What do you suppose was the result of Philip’s traveling briefly along the Mediterranean coast and preaching in those cities? Could such a brief interaction really produce significant results? We need to remember that, later, Philip and his family, including his four prophetic daughters, lived in Caesarea Maritima, the Roman capital of Judea. (Acts 21:7-9)
41. The sermon of Stephen and those of Peter and Paul recorded in the book of Acts reveal the fact that when speaking to Jews who were knowledgeable of the history of their nation, they virtually always began by speaking about some of the ancient patriarchs. Clearly, they wanted their listeners to connect the stories of these ancient followers of God with the current followers of Jesus. They believed that the Christian church had inherited the mantle of the gospel earlier carried by the Old Testament stalwarts.
42. Do you think God actually allowed the events connected to the stoning of Stephen in order to scatter the believers out of Jerusalem? Might some of us be required to be Stephens or Philips or even Pauls in these final days of the earth’s history?

The appointment of the seven to take the oversight of special lines of work, proved a great blessing to the church. **These officers gave careful consideration to individual needs as well as to the general financial interests of the church, and by their prudent management and their godly example they were an important aid to their fellow officers in binding together the various interests of the church into a united whole.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 89.2. [Bold type is added.]

43. Many of us have at one time or another served as deacons or deaconesses in our local churches. Did we realize that we were following in the footsteps of Stephen and Philip? Are we ready to do that today?

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