

Chapter 6

The Story of Stephen

Stephen Is Chosen and Commissioned (6:1-7)

Verse 1—*while the disciples were increasing*—the number of them increased (as well as their maturity).

- *Hellenistic Jews*—that is, Greek-speaking Jews, evidently part of those Jews from outside of Israel who were still visiting in Jerusalem after their conversion to Christ.
- *Against the native Hebrews*—those Jews living in Israel
- *A complaint...because their* (Hellenistic Jews) *widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of bread*—This situation probably happened because many of the believers sold their property and possessions to share with those in need (2:44-45), but all that now had to be administered, and evidently the foreign widows were overlooked and the local widows were given preference in the distribution of supplies and food (*to serve tables* in v. 2). It doesn't seem like it was on purpose because as soon as they were aware of the problem, they corrected it.

Verse 2—*the twelve*—notice Matthias is counted to make 12 apostles (see 1:26).

- *It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables*—Because the apostles were assigned and qualified for a certain task, doing anything else would take away their time and energy.

APPLICATION—When there are several things to do, you need to decide priorities. Different things have different priorities depending on the person, the situation, and the timing. We can't do everything. You will be most efficient if you set priorities. You must also decide what values you are using to set those priorities. Out of your morals come your values and then your priorities. For example, the moral "do not steal" would mean a value to teach your children to be honest. So you would set a priority of disciplining dishonesty.

Verse 3—The apostles suggested other men be chosen to distribute the supplies so that the apostles could devote their time *to prayer and to the ministry of the Word*. The decision as to who these men would be was left up to the congregation. But they suggested five qualifications: (1) *from among you*, i.e., they were to be believers, (2) *men*, not women, (3) *of good reputation*, that's why the whole congregation was to choose them, (4) *full of the Spirit*, controlled by the Holy Spirit, and (5) *full...of wisdom*. All these qualifications would be necessary for those *put in charge of this task*.

APPLICATION—When it came to disciplining women (one-on-one contact), older women were to disciple younger women (Titus 2:3-5). But when it came to financial distribution (whether money or supplies), here men were given the responsibility.

- *Seven men*—This may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed public business in an official council.

Verse 4—By choosing these seven, the Twelve could *devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word*.

APPLICATION—For those devoting themselves to the ministry of the Word (studying, preparing, teaching, preaching), meeting physical needs of others is almost impossible—there is not enough time or energy. Both are necessary, however.

Verse 5—The congregation agreed and chose seven men. All seven men have Greek names, implying they were possibly Hellenists, which would best solve the problem of serving the Hellenistic widows. This prepares us to read more of the ministries of Stephen and Philip in the next chapters. Nicolas was not Jew-born but a *proselyte from Antioch*, i.e., he had been converted to Judaism before he converted to Christianity. Nothing is known of the other four men.

APPLICATION—At first, we might think these men got a “lowly” job. Reminds me of a parable Jesus told, *His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things...”* (Matthew 25:23). Stephen was faithful in taking care of the widows. God then trusted him to give one of the great sermons in Acts and to be the first martyr for Christ.

Verse 6—The congregation chose these 7 men according to the criteria laid out by the apostles, and then they brought the 7 *before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them*. This is a commissioning with the support and authority of the apostles (see 8:17-19; 13:3; 19:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; Hebrew 6:2). These men seemed to hold a temporary position for the purpose of meeting a specific need, the distribution of the supplies to those in need, because of the nature of the church in Jerusalem at this time.

Verse 7—Luke’s progress report:

- (1) *The word of God kept on spreading*
- (2) *The number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem*
- (3) *A great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith*

Stephen’s Arrest (6:8 – 7:1)

Verse 8—Stephen has been described as:

- *of good reputation* (verse 3)
- *full...of wisdom* (verse 3)
- *a man full of [controlled by] faith* (verse 5)
- *full...of the Holy Spirit* (verses 3, 5)
- *full of grace* (verse 8)
- *full of...power* (verse 8)
- *was performing great wonders and signs among the people* (verse 8)

Verses 9-10—*Synagogue of the Freedmen*—the exact meaning is not known for sure.

- *Cyrenians and Alexandrians*—both cities in North Africa, *Cilicia*—the province where Paul’s hometown of Tarsus was located, and *Asia*—the western part of modern-day Turkey.
- Men from these areas *rose up and argued with Stephen*—in addition to being one of the 7 to serve tables and see to the needs of the widows and performing great wonders and signs, Stephen *argued* (lit. discuss, debate, examine together).
- *But they were unable to cope* [lit. oppose, stop, take a stand against] *with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking*

Verse 11—Failing to win any arguments with Stephen and desiring to remove him, *they secretly induced* [persuaded] *men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God*—i.e., to say evil words against.

- These men probably correctly quoted Stephen but taken out of context, they gave the words the intention of blasphemy. These men were spreading their conclusions, not what Stephen actually said.

Verse 12—This false accusation *stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes*

- ***They came up to him*** [Stephen] ***and dragged him away and brought him before the Council***—This is the third of four times in Acts that Jesus’ followers were before this Council: Peter and John in 4:15; Peter and apostles in 5:27; this passage; and Paul in 22:30.
- The Council was the 71-member Sanhedrin, mostly made up of Sadducees (i.e., priests).

Verses 13-14—The false witnesses testified, ***“This man incessantly*** [never stops, keeps on] ***speaks against this holy place*** [the Temple] ***and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place***—A reference to Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-60, although Jesus never said He would destroy the Temple, He said He would raise it up when it was destroyed (of course He was talking about His body, not the actual Temple building).

- ***and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us***—The implications of faith in Christ, and His ending the Law, and the Gospel going out to the whole world would conclude the Mosaic Law was temporary. But what they said and how they said it would give only a partial picture of all Stephen was trying to communicate.
- ***This Nazarene, Jesus***—Again, as in Peter’s sermon, it was clear they were talking about Jesus who had walked among them and had been crucified by this very Sanhedrin.

Verse 15—***fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel***—it probably glowed with glory, as Moses’ did from being in the presence of God (Exodus 34:29, 35).

Chapter 7

Verse 1—*The high priest* (probably Caiaphas—who presided over Jesus’ trials a few months before—Matthew 26:57; Mark 14:54; Luke 22:53; John 18:13, 24—and was high priest until A.D. 36).

- ***Are these things so?*** And the defense begins. Stephen was accused of blaspheming God, Moses, the Law, and the Temple. Most of the chapter is Stephen’s defense against these false charges. His reciting of Israel’s history was to show them that by rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, they were the ones committing blasphemy by imitating their fathers who had rejected God, Moses, the Law, and the Temple.

Defending himself against the charge of blaspheming God, Stephen covers the history from Abraham to Joseph and the Egyptian Bondage.

Verse 2—*brethren*—fellow Jews, Stephen is one of them

- ***Fathers***—showing respect for them as the leaders of the Jews
- ***The God of glory***—This title appears only here and in Psalm 29:3. It is the most complete description of God because His glory is the composite of all His attributes. The whole of Jewish history is God’s plan.
- ***Appeared to our father Abraham***—Stephen established his belief in the sovereignty of God and acknowledged Abraham as the father of the Jews. So he was neither a blasphemer nor a traitor.
- ***When he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran***—God originally called Abraham in Ur (Genesis 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7), then repeated the call in Genesis 12:1-4 while Abraham was in Haran (a city 500 miles NW of Ur, in the Mesopotamia valley between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, about half way to Canaan from Ur).

Verse 3—God said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives—Abraham lived in Haran until his father died (Genesis 11:32). Genesis 11:26 states that Terah was 70 years old when he had his first of three sons (Abraham, Nahor, and Haran). He died at the age of 205 (Genesis 11:32). Abraham was 75 when he departed from Haran (Genesis 12:4). So $205 - 75 = 130$. So Terah was 130 years old when Abraham was born.

- We are not told of any character traits, etc. possessed by Abraham (such as rejecting his idol gods) that caused God to choose him. In fact, I think the point is the opposite. There was nothing in Abraham to draw God to him. It was a total gift and choosing by God for His own purposes. Abraham simply responded when God called him.

APPLICATION—The same is true of us. Our salvation is not because we are somehow more valuable to God than someone else. It is His gift of grace (undeserved). We simply obeyed when God called us to Himself (Ephesians 1:3-14).

- Abraham was to leave his relatives, to become independent from them and dependent on God.
- ***come into the land that I will show you***—Hebrews 11:8 says, *by faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out...not knowing where he was going.*

APPLICATION—Abraham is one of the people in the Bible to whom God revealed His specific will. We should not conclude, therefore, that God will reveal a specific will of direction to us. We are to pray, get godly advice from other believers, use wisdom, and make decisions based on God’s revealed moral will in the Bible.

Verse 4—Abraham left Ur and settled in Haran (about halfway to Canaan). When his father Terah died, ***God had him move to this country in which you are now living*** (the Jewish leaders).

Verse 5—*But*—when Abraham lived in the Promised Land, he owned no property. He was a Bedouin, a Hebrew, a tent dweller. God ***gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground.*** The only thing he owned was a burial cave (Genesis 23).

- ***Even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him***—Abraham received God’s pledge, but the only promise he saw fulfilled in his lifetime was the birth of his son Isaac.

APPLICATION—When God makes a promise, He acts like it is a done thing. Even though Abraham did not actually own any of the land, if God said He would, then God acted like Abraham did own it. So God speaks as though Israel was their home and when they go to Egypt (verse 6), they are *aliens in a foreign land*. God told Jeremiah, *I am watching over My word to perform it* (1:12). God takes His word literally!!!

Verses 6-7—God predicted ***that his descendants would be...enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years*** (referring to the Egyptian bondage—Genesis 15:13; Exodus 12:40).

APPLICATION—Why the Egyptian bondage? I can think of 3 reasons: (1) The Israelites had started inter-marrying with the Canaanites (Genesis 38). In order to preserve a separate people, God put them in Egypt, where they were *loathsome to the Egyptians* (43:32). (2) God would judge and destroy an evil nation by wiping out Pharaoh and his army (15:14). (3) *the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete* (15:16), that is, God used the Israelites to destroy the evil Canaanites living in the land. We tend to have a very narrow focus—about what is happening to me. God has bigger purposes which we probably don’t know. Reminds me of Mary—she dealt with pregnancy, but the angel told her the baby *will save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21)—a much bigger plan, of which Mary was a small part.

- ***They will come out and serve Me in this place***—That’s the whole point of choosing Abraham, multiplying his descendants, giving them a land, and cursing their enemies—so they would serve God in that place! It’s the physical spot on the whole earth where God chose to put His name and put people there to worship Him.

Verse 8—*He gave him the covenant of circumcision*—Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:9-14; Leviticus 12:1-3; Joshua 5:1-5). Circumcision was not required for those who came to faith in Jesus in the New Testament (this is one of the issues at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15). Paul both refused and forbade circumcision when it symbolized a person placing themselves under law (Galatians 2:1-10; 5:1-6f.). Other Semitic people who were descended from Abraham practiced circumcision (Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites—Jeremiah 9:25), but the Canaanites did not and are often referred to in the Bible as “the uncircumcised” (Judges 14:3; Ezekiel 32:32). But when God gave the rite to Abraham, it had spiritual significance (Deuteronomy 10:16). It indicated membership in the covenant to be God’s people. It was possible to be physically circumcised but be spiritually removed from God. Jeremiah said, *Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah* (Jeremiah 4:4).

APPLICATION—An object is different if it has religious significance. For example, because Jesus died on the cross, the form of a cross has religious significance, even though the Romans killed many people on a cross. The same is true of other religions. For example, a crystal has pantheistic significance, as do dream catchers. It may mean nothing to us—but if it does have a religious meaning (especially non-Christian), my opinion is that we should not wear or use them—they communicate a message we are not trying to send.

Verse 9—*The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him*—Genesis 50:20 reads, *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.* The patriarchs were guilty of opposing God and His purpose. They sold Joseph, but God rescued him. The nation’s rebellion against God began with the patriarchs. And now the Jews were guilty of doing the same thing in falsely accusing Stephen.

Verse 10—God *granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt*—God not only controls events, He controls the results of the events. Joseph could have interpreted dreams, etc. and made no impression on Pharaoh.

APPLICATION—You do what is right in God’s sight, and He will decide whether to honor you in the sight of others (1 Chronicles 29:12). *Do not grow weary of doing good* (2 Thessalonians 3:13). We can become weary of doing good if we are not thanked or honored for it. Jesus said if you do things to be honored, you have your reward. But when you do it for God, He will see it and reward you in heaven (Matthew 6).

Verse 11—*a famine came...and great affliction*—God used this suffering to move the Israelites to Egypt, where they would multiply as a separate people, what He wanted them to do in the first place. The Jews’ rejection of the Messiah also will bring a spiritual famine and great affliction. This will last until the day *when all Israel will be saved* (Romans 11:26).

APPLICATION—God may use suffering to drive you to your knees, to compel you to spend time with Him, to remove you from a sinful situation, etc.

Verse 14—*seventy-five persons in all*—Sometimes 70 is the number given (Genesis 46:27; Exodus 1:5). But it depends on who is included. If you add Joseph’s seven grandsons and don’t add Jacob and his wife, you get 75. If you add Jacob and his wife and don’t include Joseph’s grandsons, you get 70.

Verse 16—*they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb*—Jacob was buried in Abraham’s burial plot in Machpelah (Genesis 50:13). Therefore, the “they” needs to be restricted to the immediate antecedent of “our fathers” in verse 15, i.e., Joseph and his brothers (Joshua 24:32).

- **Tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem**—According to Joshua 24:32, Jacob purchased the plot at Shechem. Abraham had built an altar in Shechem (Genesis 12:6-7), and it is likely that he purchased the ground on which he built the altar. But he did not settle there, so over time, the site may have reverted to the occupying people of Hamor, thus necessitating Jacob’s repurchase of it (Archer, “Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties,” p. 379-81). Another possible explanation is that Stephen put the two things together. (For example, my husband’s ancestors purchased our property in the 1860s. But then years later, the railroad repossessed it, and later generations had to buy it back.) We do not have enough information to know exactly what happened.

Having defended himself against the charge of blaspheming God, Stephen now moves to the second accusation, rejection of Moses (6:11). He does this by continuing his historical survey. In the first 16 verses, he covered the period from the call of Abraham to Joseph and the captivity of Israel in Egypt. Now he talks about the second great period of Israel’s history: from Moses to the Babylonian Captivity.

Verse 17—*the people increased and multiplied in Egypt*—The patriarchs were dead. The people were content to stay in Egypt. But *the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham*—It was time for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham of giving his descendants the land. So, God orchestrated events to move Israel out of Egypt, just as He had moved them there to multiply many years before.

Verse 18—*until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.* Exodus 1:9-10 says, *He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us.*

Verse 19—Pharaoh commanded that the boy babies be cast into the Nile to die (Exodus 1:22).

Verses 20-21—*It was at this time that Moses was born*—His very survival as a male baby was God’s protection. He stayed 3 months in his parents’ home, then he was put out to the Nile—but in a basket with his sister watching over him. Pharaoh’s daughter discovered him and adopted him as her own child (Exodus 2:1-6).

Verse 22—Moses *was lovely in the sight of God* (verse 20), **he was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds**. Moses was uniquely qualified to lead Israel out of Egypt.

Verses 23-24—Moses evidently wanted to help his people by delivering them somehow from their oppressors. He demonstrated this by killing an Egyptian who was treating an Israelite unjustly.

Verse 25—*he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand*—This reminds us of when Joseph told his brother’s his dream that they would bow down to him, but they didn’t agree either.

APPLICATION—“Understanding” is to perceive the intended meaning from the information received. For example, Jesus spoke in parables so some of the people would not understand—they heard the words, but they didn’t understand what He meant by those words (Matthew 13:13). After Jesus’ resurrection, *He opened their [the disciples’] minds to understand the Scriptures* (Luke 24:45). Speaking of unbelievers, Paul said, *a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God...he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised* (1 Corinthians 2:14). Hebrews 11:3 says, *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible*. Many people read the Bible (observation) and skip right to application. But **essential** for Bible study is interpretation, i.e. to understand the author’s intended meaning. If you don’t understand that, you may be applying the wrong thing!! And not applying the right thing!!! Of course, this is essential in communication with one another also. We all see through a pair of glasses (our gender, our experiences, our knowledge, etc.)—so we tend to give our own meaning to what is said, rather than to strive to understand what the other person means.

Verses 26-28—The next day, two Israelites were fighting, and Moses *tried to reconcile them in peace*. But they *pushed him away, saying, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?”* By rejecting Moses, the Israelites lengthened their time in bondage another forty years.

Verse 29—When Moses realized that his killing of the Egyptian had become widely known, he fled to Midian. Midian was the son of Abraham from his wife Keturah, whom he married after Sarah had died (Genesis 25:1-2). So the Midianites were distant relatives of the Israelites. Although Moses’ father-in-law Jethro was friends of the Israelites, mostly the Midianites were enemies of Israel through the period of the judges and kings. While some may have been nomadic shepherds, the general geographical area associated with the Midianites is northwest Arabia, that is, the east side of the Red Sea.

Verse 30—After another 40 years (Moses now being near 80 years of age), **an angel** (lit. messenger) appeared to him *in the flame of a burning thorn bush* (Exodus 3). “Sinai” means “bush.” This is Mt. Horeb where Moses received the tablets of the Law (Exodus 19:18).

Verse 31—*When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight*—Why? Because *...the bush is not burned up* (Exodus 3:3). It got his attention—the same thing that happened when Peter healed the lame man (Acts 3:10).

- **There came the voice of the Lord**—This was evidently the voice of Jesus. He is the physical Person of the Godhead who was seen and heard in the Old Testament (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15).

Verse 32—*I AM the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob—This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations—I AM* (Exodus 3:15). God is without time. He is always in the present tense. Not “was” and not “will be” but “is.” In a sense, God was renewing the Abrahamic Covenant with Moses.

- Moses’ reaction: ***Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look***—God’s presence called for fear, not the flippant familiarity by some today who claim to have “visions” of God. Jesus said *...fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell* (Matthew 10:28).

Verse 33—*But the Lord said to him, “Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground*—Like the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the area around the burning bush was made holy by the presence of God. This is one way we know these appearances are actually God. When it is an angel, there is no holy ground or bowing down (see Revelation 19:10).

Verse 34—*God said, I have certainly seen...and have heard...and I have come down*—God sees and hears and He acts—but it is on His terms and in His own timing. God had His reasons for the Israelites to be in Egypt for 400 years. But He was also aware of their suffering. And He was and is always aware of His covenant to Abraham.

- ***I will send you to Egypt***—God’s solution was not one that the people or Moses would have chosen.

Verse 35—*This Moses whom they disowned, saying, “Who made you a ruler and a judge?” is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and deliverer*—This is Stephen’s main point—Israel has a history of spiritual pride and ignorance that causes them to reject the deliverers God sends them. Stephen has just pointed out that their forefathers rejected both Joseph and Moses, whom God had sent to deliver their people. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 21:33-46. And now Stephen said his audience was doing the same thing—they were rejecting a post-resurrection Jesus whom God had sent to spiritually deliver them from their sins.

Verses 36-37—*This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years*—What did God and Moses do? Deliverance, wonders, signs, miracles, parting Red Sea, manna, defeating armies, clothes not wearing out, etc. etc. Yet Israel rebelled, causing them to wander in the wilderness for forty more years before going into the land.

- ***This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren”***—This passage is taken from Deuteronomy 18:15. Jesus was the prophet, like Moses, whom God raised up. But the Sanhedrin, like the Israelites in Moses’ day, rejected the prophet. But this time it was more serious because it was the Messiah Himself that the Sanhedrin rejected.

Stephen Now Transitions from Moses to Speaking about the Law

Verse 38—The One who spoke to Moses from the burning bush on Mt. Sinai before the deliverance then spoke on Mt. Sinai, giving him the Law after they were delivered from Egypt.

Verse 39—But *our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated [push away] him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt*—Stephen did not disobey the Law, but their fathers, whom the Sanhedrin revered, rejected both Moses and the Law, and in spite of the cruelty they suffered in Egypt, in their hearts they longed to return there (Numbers 11:5).

Verses 40-41—*saying to Aaron* (Moses’ brother and right-hand man and future first high priest), ***“Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we***

do not know what happened to him.” At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands—

APPLICATION—The process of sin: (1) *in their hearts they longed to return there*, (2) rejection of *Moses who led us out of Egypt*, and then (3) *they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol*. You long for it in your heart, you reject what is of God, and then pursue the sin.

Also, we observe that Aaron gave them the idol they wanted instead of standing up for God and Moses. It seems to be the common kind of leadership in Christianity today—give the people what they want instead of standing up for God’s Word, which convicts people of their sin and need for repentance.

Verses 42-43—*But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven—*God could have destroyed the whole nation—He even wanted to do that and make a nation from Moses’ descendants (Exodus 32:10). But Moses pleaded with God to remember His covenant with Abraham, and so God only destroyed 3,000 of the people (Exodus 32:28). However, God did abandon His people to idolatry (Hosea 4:17f).

- *As it is written in the book of the prophets [Amos 5:25-27], “It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship—Moses said the Israelites have been rebellious against the Lord from the day I knew you (Deuteronomy 9:24) and while I [Moses] am still alive with you today, you have been rebellious against the Lord, how much more, then, after my death? (Deuteronomy 31:27). Even with the miracles God performed in bringing them out of Egypt, they still kept the Egyptian gods, something to fall back on when they didn’t like what God was doing or what He wanted them to do.*

APPLICATION—What do we fall back on? For example, we hear of people so desperate to be healed when God has not healed them, they go to healers, or pantheistic religious practices, to get what they want. Romans 1:18f describes people who make idols as having rejected God and worshipping things made by their own hands. Jeremiah 10 says that is “stupid.”

- ***I will also remove you beyond Babylon—***Amos used the word “Damascus” where Stephen used the word “Babylon.” Amos was prophesying the captivity of the Northern Kingdom of ten tribes of Israel to the Assyrian Empire, where the city of Damascus was, in 722 B.C. Later the Southern Kingdom was taken captive to Babylon. Led by the inspiring Holy Spirit, Stephen expanded the text to include the judgment of God on the whole nation.

In response to the accusation that he spoke against the Jewish house of worship, Stephen now transitions from Moses and the Law to speaking about the Tabernacle/Temple

Verse 44—*Our fathers had the tabernacle...in the wilderness, ...make it according to the pattern which he had seen—*See Exodus 25:8, 9, 40. They had the glory of God in their midst.

Verse 45—*our fathers brought it in with Joshua ... until the time of David—*See Joshua 3:14ff; 18:1; 23:9; 24:18. They had the Tabernacle in their midst from the time they entered the land with Joshua, through the whole conquest of the land, through the time of the Judges. It was a constant symbol of the presence of God.

Verse 46—*David...asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob—*See 2 Samuel 7. David wanted to build a Temple, a permanent structure, for the dwelling place for God, but God would not let him. But David collected the supplies. Its design was similar to the Tabernacle.

Verse 47—*But it was Solomon who built a house for Him*—David’s son Solomon built the first Temple. However, that Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (Ezra 5:12). The Temple had been replaced by one built by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian Captivity (Ezra 5:2) and “beautified” by King Harod. But this Temple would also be destroyed, in the lifetime of many of the Sanhedrin members listening to Stephen (in 70 A.D.).

Verse 48—*However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands*—Solomon understood this. At the dedication of the first Temple, he said, “*Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built!*” (1 Kings 8:27).

Verses 49-50—Stephen supports this by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “*Heaven in My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?*” says the Lord, “*Or what place is there for My repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?*” (Isaiah 66:1). Stephen is not guilty of blaspheming the Temple, they were, for confining God to it. Instead, along with Solomon and Isaiah, Stephen argued that God was greater than any temple. “The Temple was the symbol of God’s presence, not the prison of His essence” (MacArthur, “Acts 1-12”).

APPLICATION—The Sanhedrin thought the Temple contained God. So many people, who define the church as a building, think the church building contains God. But as Solomon said, *the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands!!!* A danger in thinking God is in that building is to then live like He is nowhere else. The church building is not “holy ground” unless there are believers, indwelt with the Holy Spirit, in the building. But the same is true of your home, of a store, of an office, etc. “Church” is a plural word meaning “called out ones.” It is believers (Ephesians 1:22-23). Assembling is one of the things the church *does*, like Bible study, prayer, Communion, etc. Assembling is not the definition of the church. You can’t “go to church” (whether meaning a building or a gathering). You **are** the church!!

Verse 51—After laying the historical foundation for it, Stephen hit the Sanhedrin with his charge against them—*You men who are stiff-necked...you are doing just as your fathers did*—They were just like their fathers in the days of Joseph, Moses, and David. They are stiff-necked (“obstinate” as God called their ancestors in Exodus 32:9; 33:5). It’s a person who defiantly refuses to bow before the Lord.

- ***Uncircumcised in heart and ears***—It’s the term used to describe the Gentiles, people outside the Abrahamic Covenant—people who do not know God (Judges 14:3; Ezekiel 32:32). It’s the ultimate condemnation of these “spiritual” leaders of the Jews (physically circumcised).
- ***Resisting the Holy Spirit***—God testified to them through the Scriptures, the works of Christ, the resurrection of Christ—yet they resisted the truth. They admitted that *a noteworthy miracle has taken place*, the lame man was now walking—that was undeniable (4:16), but they resisted the implication of that truth—that Jesus truly was the Messiah.

APPLICATION—Unbelievers are described as “stiff-necked,” defiantly refusing to bow before the Lord; “uncircumcised in heart and ears,” not dedicated to God in what they think, love, or listen to; and those who “resist the Holy Spirit,” though God gives them much evidence from which to make the right decision, so they are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20-21). We are believers, but we can still **act** like unbelievers when we refuse to submit our will in obedience to God, when we are not dedicated to God in our thoughts and emotions, when we “quench the Spirit” who is convicting us of our sin. If we are living like an unbeliever, we should have no assurance of our salvation (1 John 2:3-5).

Verse 52—*Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become*—Their forefathers persecuted and killed the prophets who prophesied of the coming Messiah, and now these men of the Sanhedrin persecuted and killed the actual Messiah. Jesus had strong words to say against this generation (Luke 11:47-51). These same prophets made God’s great “Hall of Fame” (Hebrews 11), *men of whom the world was not worthy* (v. 38). And Stephen would

soon join their number in the long line of God's messengers, killed by God's chosen nation, and the first killed for preaching the name of Christ.

- ***The Righteous One***—a title used only here and in Acts 13:14 and 22:14.

Verse 53—*you who received the law as ordained by angels*—It was their pride as the leaders and priests of the Jews. They boasted, *if we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets* (Matthew 23:30), yet they had done far worse. Their fathers murdered God's prophets, but they murdered God's Son.

- ***Yet did not keep it***—The Law pointed to Christ (John 5:39). Jesus said, *"If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me"* (John 5:46). They had no real respect for Moses or the Law or they never would have murdered the One Moses promised (Genesis 18:15), the One of whom the Law spoke.

The clear contrast between Stephen and his murderers is so extreme that it could symbolize the contrast between heaven and hell. It is the contrast of being filled with anger and being filled with the Spirit. It is the contrast between spiritual blindness and spiritual sight. It is the contrast between death and life—between love and hate.

Verse 54—*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him*—They probably heard the first part of his speech with interest and agreement—his reciting of Israel's great history. But slowly his drift started becoming clear. They grew uncomfortable, they were *cut to the quick* (lit. "to saw in half"). Stephen's words ripped apart their false spirituality and exposed them as blasphemous hypocrites. Rather than being broken in repentance by Stephen's words, they were filled with rage (see Revelation 16:8-11, 17-21). This is at least the third time they have heard the Gospel (4:8ff; 5:27ff), yet they are hardened toward the truth of God's Word (see Romans 11:7-10; Hebrews 3:7-12).

- ***They began gnashing their teeth***—Their action was a preview of what they would do throughout eternity. Jesus described hell as a place where there is gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:11-12; 13:41-42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

APPLICATION—Part of the suffering of hell will include the endless anger and frustration of those people who will forever feel both intense conviction for their damning sin and anger toward God. People who reject God's grace and love will not feel remorse under His judgment. That will only make them angrier.

Verse 55—In contrast, Stephen ***being full of the Holy Spirit***—"being" expresses "continuance of an antecedent state or condition" [*Greek Lexicon*]. It's in the present tense. Being filled with the Spirit was a way of life for Stephen (see 6:3, 5), so he didn't have to make any adjustments in his life when his time came to face death. The Spirit of God gives grace to persecuted believers, enabling them to glorify God in their deaths.

APPLICATION—Christians should boldly communicate Christ in all circumstances, knowing that the Holy Spirit will grant them the grace to face the consequences with joy and peace (see 1 Peter 4:14; 2 Corinthians 12:10).

- ***He gazed intently into heaven***—as though he were looking for Jesus—***and saw the glory of God*** [Shekinah], ***and Jesus standing at the right hand of God***—Only a few in Scripture had a glimpse into heaven: Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-3); Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:26-28); Paul (2 Corinthians 12:2-4); and John (Revelation 4:1ff). Jesus was there at the right hand of God, as Peter had said He was (Acts 2:33). Stephen was the first to see Jesus (before Paul and John) in His glorified state after His ascension. Perhaps Jesus was standing to welcome Stephen into heaven. Remember, as far as we know, Stephen had not seen Jesus in His earthly body.

Verse 56—Stephen is so awed by what he sees that he cries out, **“Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”**

Verse 57—But this statement was blasphemy to the Sanhedrin. *Son of Man*, a name of Jesus with which the Sanhedrin was very familiar. Stephen is saying the person Jesus, whom they had killed, was now at the right hand of God in glory, as Jesus had prophesied to them at His trial (Matthew 26:63-64). **They cried out with a loud voice and covered their ears** so they couldn’t hear any more “blasphemy.” Then they **rushed at him with one impulse**. They continued the tradition of their fathers by rejecting yet another of God’s messengers to them.

- “rush” is used to describe the mad rush of the herd of demon-possessed swine down the steep embankment into the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:13; Matthew 8:32). They threw aside all their dignity, and the highest court in Israel was reduced to a howling, murderous mob.

Verses 58-59—**When they had driven him out of the city**—killing had to be outside the city (Leviticus 24:14), as it was with Jesus (John 19:17).

- **They began stoning him**—the punishment for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16).
- **the witnesses**—Deuteronomy 17:7 commanded that the witnesses be the first to throw stones at the accused. Perhaps the false witnesses did that here.
- **Laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul**—Later known as the Apostle Paul. Here is his first appearance in the book of Acts. He becomes the dominant figure from chapter 13 to the end of the book. His position up front, where the action is, suggests he was deeply involved in the whole wicked affair. Stephen’s calmness and forgiving love for his killers must have been the seeds of Paul’s own conversion.
- **They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”**—This is similar to what Jesus cried from the cross, *Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit* (Luke 23:46), with one big exception—Jesus committed Himself to the Father. Stephen committed himself to Jesus—showing that Stephen regarded Jesus as God, equal to the Father. Also, it shows that Stephen expected to enter the Lord’s presence the moment he died.

APPLICATION—The Bible does not teach any delay at all between life here and in heaven, either in some holding place (purgatory) or some unconscious state (soul-sleep). The Scripture teaches that believers enter Christ’s presence immediately following death (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23). The story of the rich man and Lazarus taught that the dead are never unconscious or unaware of their circumstances. Revelation 6:9-11 describes the Tribulation martyrs as awake in the presence of God and able to plead with the Lord for vengeance on their murderers.

Verse 60—**Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”**—The mob was full of hatred. Stephen was full of love. He was praying for their salvation, since that was the only way God would not hold their sin against them. His prayer was answered with Saul [Paul].

APPLICATION—Only Christians can love as Stephen did, *because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us* (Romans 5:5). We forgive, not because the other person deserves it. We forgive because God told us to do so (Ephesians 4:32) and because God forgave us (Matthew 5:44-46; 6:14).

- **Having said this, he fell asleep**—Stephen died and entered in the presence of His Lord.

APPLICATION—Sleep is a good way to describe the death of a believer. It no longer has a sting (1 Corinthians 15:55-56). It is painless and temporary and takes one from the experience of weariness, work, and consciousness of all the problems of life, to the freshness of a new day (John 11:11-12; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; 5:10). Jesus died (Acts 2:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:14), but after His death, believers’ death is described as “sleeping.”

Acts 8

Verse 1a—Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death—Reminding us again of Saul [Paul]. By his own confession, Paul said, ...*though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy...and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus...sinners, among whom I am foremost of all* (1 Timothy 1:13-15). ...*in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. 'And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.'* (Acts 22:19-20). Augustine said, “If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul.” God changed the death-dealing Saul into one bringing the life-bringing Gospel to the entire Roman world, forever altering the course of history.

Stephen’s death triggered the first persecution against the entire church—spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus. This persecution, which at first seemed to be a negative, was a positive factor in moving the church out of Jerusalem. In chapter 8, we’ll see the church reaching into Judea and Samaria—all in carrying out Jesus’ command *to be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria...* (Acts 1:8). So this chapter is another turning point. So far, Jerusalem has been the dominant location, and the church there continues, but the explosive days of apostolic miracles and huge growth fades. The murder of Stephen is the final rejection of the Gospel by the Jewish leaders. Now God moves the Gospel out into the world.

Verse 1b—on that day—the very day of the murder of Stephen

- a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem—This was predicted by Jesus: *If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you* (John 15:20); ...*an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God* (John 16:2).
- **they were all scattered**—There were still believers living in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26; 11:2, 22; 15:4; 21:17). From Acts 11:19 we learn it was especially the Hellenistic believers (Stephen being a Hellenistic Jew) who left, i.e., non-native Greek Jews. **So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch...**
- **throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria**—Judea is the country in which Jerusalem was located. Samaria is the area north of Jerusalem. The Samaritans were half-breeds, i.e., part Jews and part Assyrians (who came into the land in 722 B.C. when they captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel).
- **except the apostles**—From now on, it seems that the Jerusalem church was only native converted Jews. In other words, the many people who had come for the Jewish feast of Pentecost, converted to Christianity, and were part of the early growth of the church, had now scattered because of the persecution and the death of Stephen. What started as having all in common and meeting needs now was life-threatening. The apostles remained in Jerusalem, continuing to spread the Gospel among the Jews there and continuing to teach and lead the church.

Verse 2—devout men buried Stephen—the word “devout” is usually used of pious Jews (Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5). Perhaps these were friends of Stephen who were not yet believers.

- **Made loud lamentation over him**—This was forbidden in the Jewish *Mishna* in the case of an executed criminal—so this was basically a public protest of Stephen’s death, indicating they did not consider him a criminal.

Verse 3—*But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house—armed with authority from the chief priests (Acts 26:10), and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.*

Verse 4—But God used the wrath of men to accomplish His purposes (Psalm 76:10)—***Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the Word***—In spite of the persecution, the believers were not hiding in fear. Instead, they continued to preach the Word. The word “went about” is from *dierchomai*, a word used often in Acts for missionary endeavors (8:40; 9:32; 13:6; 14:24; 15:2, 41; 16:6; 18:23; 19:1, 21; 20:2). “Preaching” is from *evangelizo*, which means proclaiming the Gospel, i.e., evangelism.

Verse 5—Philip—I don’t think this would be the Apostle Philip, who remained in Jerusalem (verse 1), but one of the seven chosen to serve the needs of the Hellenist widows, like Stephen (Acts 6:5). He became the first missionary who went outside of Jerusalem to proclaim the Gospel. He is the only man in Scripture who was given the title “evangelist” (Acts 21:8). He is the key person in the rest of chapter 8.

- ***went down to the city of Samaria***—Jerusalem was in the hill country, Samaria was in the valley, about 40 miles north of Jerusalem. It was on the old patriarch road, running north and south through the hill country.
- The Samaritans were half-breeds, part Jew and part Gentile Assyrian as a result of the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. In the inter-testament period, hostility between the Jews and Samaritans grew. Jesus broke this barrier when He spoke to the Samaritan woman in John 4:4ff.
- ***began proclaiming Christ to them***—In proclaiming the Gospel to the Samaritans, Philip was obeying Christ’s command in 1:8. “Proclaiming” is the word for “to proclaim publicly.” The Samaritans had a background of belief in God, being part Jewish descendants from Abraham. So they were ready to hear the Gospel about Christ.

Verse 6—*The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip*—The Holy Spirit had prepared their hearts to hear Philip’s message.

- ***as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing***—They authenticated him as a true messenger of God.

Verse 7—Here are some samples of the miracles performed by Philip—***unclean spirits...were coming out of them...paralyzed and lame were healed.***

APPLICATION—Demon-possessed people exist today in increasing numbers. As C.S. Lewis says, “Satan and his demons adapt themselves to whatever world view prevails in a given society. They are equally at home with Western materialists and third-world magicians” (*The Screwtape Letters*, p. 3). Many are controlled by demons who give no outward sign of it. That is especially true of those involved in promoting false religions, drugs, alcohol, pornography, etc.

- The biblical instruction for the spiritual warfare is in Ephesians 6:10-18.
- ***Unclean spirits...coming out of them shouting with a loud voice***—Demons often cried out when they were cast out of an individual (Mark 1:23, 26; 3:11; 5:7; Luke 4:33, 41), often in rage.

Verse 8—*So there was much rejoicing in that city*—Some were healed, some were delivered from demons, and some accepted the Gospel—they were true believers. Others, however, were false believers, such as Simon, about whom we read in the next verses.

APPLICATION—“One of the most fearful realities in all of Scripture is that some who think they are saved will be eternally lost. Thinking they are on the narrow way of saving truth that leads to heaven, they are in reality on the broad way

of religion that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). They will one day hear from the Lord Jesus Christ the most shocking, terrifying words any human could ever hear: *I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness* (Matthew 7:23). To their horror, they will discover too late that there is an entrance to hell at the edge of the very gates of heaven” [MacArthur, *Acts*, 238].

Whenever the Gospel is preached, there will be genuine saving faith and false faith. The seed of the Word of God will fall on good soil (who receive the Word, it grows and produces fruit) and bad soil (it may appear to receive the Word, but it has no root nor fruit). There are those who *have faith to the preserving of the soul* and those who *shrink back to destruction* (Hebrews 10:39). There will be wheat and tares (see Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43).

In the following verses, we read about the false faith of Simon Magus and the genuine faith of the Ethiopian eunuch.

False Faith

Verse 9—*Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city*—“Magic” was a mix of science and superstition, combining astrology, divination, and occultic practices with history, mathematics, and agriculture. It could be trickery or demonic. It’s no coincidence that Luke has just mentioned two verses earlier that there were many in this city *who had unclean spirits*. Simon was evidently one of them.

- The result was that he was *astonishing the people of Samaria*—they were greatly impressed.
- He was *claiming to be someone great*—being called “the Great Power of God” (see verse 10).

Verse 10—*they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him*—Impressed by his occult powers, his hold on all the people was complete.

- *Saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God”*—This title showed that Simon viewed himself as God (see Mark 14:62). The early church fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of cult of Gnosticism and that he viewed himself as God incarnate.

Verse 11—*they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts*—Simon’s perverted view of himself gave Satan an opportunity to use him to spread false doctrine through the church. He probably believed in his own powers—that would make him even more dangerous and believable.

APPLICATION—If you see something “supernatural,” there are only two explanations: demonic or of God. Too many people have the false belief that anything supernatural must be from God. But Satanic powers can do supernatural things (for example, Exodus 7:11).

APPLICATION—The Samaritans believed in God and had messianic hopes. That made them especially vulnerable to someone like Satan. Whatever your “religious” bias is, Satan will encourage false belief in that area. For example, rather than study “prayer” in the Bible and find out what God says about it, if I have a view that God “speaks” to me, then I will find books that support that view and will enable me to continue to develop something that may not even be in the Bible. The books or teaching I get may use the Bible to support false teaching. Remember, Satan knew and used God’s Word in his temptation of Eve and Jesus.

Verse 12—*But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike*—Simon’s magical arts were no match for Philip’s Spirit-given power (verses 6-7). As more people were saved, Simon’s following began to dwindle.

Verse 13—*Even Simon himself believed*—Simon did not have saving faith. James 2:19 says even the demons believe—but they certainly are not saved. John 2:23-25 described the shallow faith of some who followed Jesus. 1 John 2:4 says if a person says they have come to know Jesus but doesn’t keep His commandments, they are a liar. In the parable of the sower, Jesus described the seed of the

Word of God as falling on all kinds of soil (the preparedness of a person's heart). Some receive the Word but don't get fed or the Word gets choked out by other things. Here, it seems Simon believed the works, but did not repent or have a transformation of his heart. He continued in his prideful mindset.

- ***after being baptized***—Baptism has no power to remove sin. It is a ritual performed after **salvation but does not cause salvation**. (See the discussion on Acts 2:38.)
- ***he continued on with Philip***—For three possible reasons: (1) he wanted to keep up the contact with the people following Philip, his own former admirers; (2) ***as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed***—he had a sort of “professional” interest in Philip and wanted to know the source of Philip's amazing powers; and (3) as his later conduct showed (verses 18-19), he wanted to figure out how to acquire that power for himself. Even today, magicians often sell each other their tricks and incantations.

Verse 14—*Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God*—That the Samaritans were included as believers must have been a shock to devout Jews, who despised them as half-breed outcasts.

- ***they sent them Peter and John***—Some reasons they came: (1) they may have come to help Philip preach the Gospel, in light of so many becoming believers and (2) they gave apostolic sanction and blessing to Philip's work among the Samaritans, to affirm that even these half-breeds were welcome into the body of Christ.

Verses 15-16—(3) *who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit*—Although they had believed, the Holy Spirit ***...had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus***.

- Many teach that Christians receive the Spirit later, after salvation, and use this passage for support. They say this is a clear example of people who are saved but do not have the Spirit. However, that ignores the transitional nature of the book of Acts and goes against the teaching of other passages of Scripture, such as Romans 8:9, *if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him*, and 1 Corinthians 12:13, *by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body* at conversion.
- By delaying the Spirit's coming until Peter and John arrived, it showed several things:
 - For centuries, the Samaritans and Jews had been bitter rivals. If the Samaritans would have received the Spirit apart from the Jerusalem church, there could have ended up being two churches: a Jewish church and a Samaritan church, and the rift would have continued. But God wanted one church.
 - God preserved the unity of the church—the apostles could give testimony to the Jerusalem church that the Samaritans did receive the Holy Spirit.
 - The Samaritans learned they were under the apostolic authority—those men who were receiving direct revelation from God regarding this new church age and who were writing the New Testament.
 - The keys of the church age were given to Peter (Matthew 16:19). Peter was the initial distributor of the Holy Spirit to the three people groups described in Acts 1:8—the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10).
- Once this initial group received the Spirit, all the Samaritans, who then believed, received the Spirit at the point of salvation. There is no other mention of them receiving the Spirit apart from salvation.

Verse 17—*Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit*—Evidently there was some visible sign that they received the Holy Spirit because “Simon saw” something. But the Bible doesn't tell us what that sign was.

Verses 18-19—*Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit"*—Simon was treating Peter and John like they also practiced magic, like he did. So he was ready and willing to negotiate the price to buy the secret of their power. By this act, Simon gave his name to the term “simony,” which throughout history has referred to the buying and selling of church/religious offices.

APPLICATION—Nothing God has is for sale—especially not the Holy Spirit!! There is nothing sinful men have to offer Him. Salvation is freely given. The Bible ends with the invitation, *The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost* (Revelation 22:17). Yet people are ignorant of that fact and are striving desperately to buy God's blessing—which cannot be done.

Verses 20-21—*But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God"*—Peter reacted with outrage at Simon's attempt. Simon's view of the Spirit as a commodity to be bought and added to his repertoire was utterly and blasphemously wrong and demonstrated how lost he was.

Verse 22—*Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you*—Peter followed his condemnation with a call for Simon to repent. As we saw in 6:10, “repent” means to “change your mind,” to call your sin, sin and turn from that sin (*this wickedness of yours...the intention of your heart*) to God. Forgiveness is available for even what Simon had said.

Verse 23—*"For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity"*—“Gall” is a bitter ingredient or bile (such as the bile in your “gallbladder”). Put with “bitterness,” it communicates the idea of something doubly bitter. It describes someone *in the bondage of iniquity*. Proverbs 5:22 says, *His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin*.

Verse 24—*But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me"*—Simon refused to repent. Instead, his only concern was to escape the consequences of his sin. Like Judas, he felt remorse for his sin, not repentance.

True Faith

Verse 25—*So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans*—Peter and John headed back to Jerusalem, but now they were preaching the gospel to the Samaritans! And now the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit when they believed. There is no mention of a separate anointing.

Verse 26—*But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.)*—The circumstances that led to the eunuch's salvation were sovereignly and specifically arranged by the Spirit.

- Gaza was one of the five chief cities of the Philistines (with Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath). There were two roads from Jerusalem to Gaza, and the Spirit commanded Philip to take the one that was seldom used—the desert road [Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts*, p. 311].

- The Greek word “south” can also be translated “noon,” in which case the road would be even more deserted of travelers because of the heat.

Verse 27—*So he got up and went*—He didn’t question God’s instruction of leaving a thriving work in Samaria for a deserted road. But he had a specific instruction from *an angel of the Lord* who spoke to him.

APPLICATION—In spite of much of what is being taught today, we do not have specific directions from God to know His specific directive will. We are to know and obey His moral will, revealed in the Word of God. Nowhere does it say in the Bible that just because God revealed His specific will to some people, like Philip, that He will also reveal that to us today. You should not use examples in the Bible to determine your theology.

APPLICATION—So many decisions in Christianity are made pragmatically—based on what “works” (of course, with us defining “what works”). Here the Spirit of God led Philip away from a place where many were becoming believers to go to a place to speak to one individual person who would believe. Probably not a decision we would have made on our own pragmatically.

- ***there was an Ethiopian***—Ethiopia was a large kingdom located in Africa, south of Egypt. To the Greeks and Romans, it represented the outer limits of the known world [Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts*, p. 223].
- ***eunuch***—a man who has had his testicles removed, who usually guarded the harem of women. The idea was that they would be more dedicated servants because they would not have sexual desires. However, the term can also be translated government “official,” one who had not been castrated (such as Potiphar, who was married—Genesis 39:1—the word translated “officer”). Also, if he was castrated, he would not be allowed access to the Temple (Deuteronomy 23:1) as a proselyte (convert to Judaism). So the term probably is better translated “officer” rather than “eunuch.”
- ***a court official...who was in charge of all her treasure***—This eunuch had power and prestige. In modern terms, he was the Minister of Finance or Secretary of the Treasury.
- ***of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians***—“Candace” is not a proper name. It is an official title, like Pharaoh or Caesar. In their kingdom, the real power was held by the queen mothers.
- ***he had come to Jerusalem to worship***—He was a seeker after the true God. We are not told how he came into contact with Judaism. (There was a large Jewish settlement in Alexandria, Egypt, the kingdom north of Ethiopia.) But he made the long journey to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews.

Verse 28—*and he was returning*—to Ethiopia, after the feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost—we do not know how many feasts he attended, but probably several after such a long journey.

- ***sitting in his chariot***—He had hardly left Jerusalem when he stopped to read this scroll he had acquired. He was eager to know about God.
- ***was reading the prophet Isaiah***—While God’s existence and some of His attributes can be discerned from nature (Romans 1:20), saving knowledge of Him comes only through the Scriptures (John 5:39, 46; Luke 24:25-27; Romans 10:12-15). He had a desire to know God and was aware that He was to be known through the Scriptures. How he got a scroll of Isaiah we’re not told. Probably at a great price and with much difficulty for a Gentile.

Verse 29—*Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot”*—Philip boldly obeyed, even though for him to approach a high Gentile government official would not be proper.

Verse 30—*Philip ran up and heard him reading*—The eunuch’s reading out loud gave Philip the opportunity to speak about the Scriptures and the Gospel.

- ***Isaiah the prophet***—He evidently was so perplexed at what he was reading that he didn’t seem to care who Philip was or why he was there with him.
- ***and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”***—We looked at this word “understand” in 7:25. I want to repeat it here because it is crucial to Bible study.

APPLICATION—“Understanding” is to perceive the intended meaning from the information received. For example, Jesus spoke in parables so some of the people would not understand—they heard the words, but they didn’t understand what he meant by those words (Matthew 13:13). After Jesus’ resurrection, *He opened their [the disciples’] minds to understand the Scriptures* (Luke 24:45). Speaking of unbelievers, Paul said, *a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God...he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised* (1 Corinthians 2:14). Hebrews 11:3 says, *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible*. Many people read the Bible (observation) and skip right to application. But **essential** for Bible study is interpretation, i.e. to understand the author’s intended meaning. If you don’t understand that, you may be applying the wrong thing!! And not applying the right thing!!! Of course, this is essential in communication with one another also. We all see through a pair of glasses (our gender, our experiences, our knowledge, etc.)—so we tend to give our own meaning (through the glasses of our own world view) to what is said, rather than to strive to understand what the other person, who is speaking, means.

Verse 31—*And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?”* It reminds me of Ezra and the Levites who *explained the law...they read from the book, from the law of God, explaining to give the sense so that they understood the reading* (Nehemiah 8:7-8). I have a quote in my Bible, “I claim no special revelation—just a desire to accurately explain what the Bible has to say.”

- ***And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him***—Obviously, the Holy Spirit had prepared this man’s heart so that he openly welcomed Philip into his chariot.

APPLICATION—I can’t help but think that it was also good that it was Philip standing there and not someone else with a different view of Scripture. When evangelism is done, a person is awakened spiritually. They are open to learning. But if they are not discipled, they can receive false teaching and their state becomes worse than the first (see Matthew 12:43-45). We need to help people understand the Word of God every opportunity we have.

Verses 32-33—*Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: “He was led as a sheep to slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away, who will relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.”* The passage is Isaiah 53:7-8.

Verse 34—*The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”* When they ask you a question, it is your “open door” to talk about God (see Colossians 4:2-6).

Verse 35—*Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him*—Scripture alone is *the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes* (Romans 1:16). Philip showed that Jesus was the Lamb that was taken away. The Gospel is the Person and work of Jesus Christ (Romans 10:17).

APPLICATION—Every believer should be knowledgeable enough in the Scriptures to meet people at their point of perplexity and lead them to the Savior (see 1 Peter 3:15). Testimonies, tracts, stories, etc. are no substitute for the Scripture.

Verse 36—*As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”*—It’s implied in his statement that he was granted saving faith and instructed about baptism when Philip *preached Jesus to him*. At just that moment,

on this desert road, the Eunuch is amazed and exclaims, “Look! Water!” It’s another example of the sovereign Spirit’s control of events.

Verse 37—*[And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”]*—The brackets indicate that this verse is not in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts. But something like this must have occurred.

Verse 38—*And he ordered the chariot to stop*—indicating he was not driving, that is, there were others in his entourage.

- *and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him*—Baptism is a public confession of faith—which the eunuch did openly in front of his entourage.

Verse 39—*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away*—Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:12, 14; 8:3) were also miraculously snatched away. This miracle confirmed that Philip was God’s spokesman.

- *and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing*—Philip was a tool the Holy Spirit used. But the eunuch’s salvation was about Jesus, and he had some Scriptures. The eunuch wasn’t worshipping or following the “messenger.”

Verse 40—*But Philip found himself at Azotus*—About 20 miles north of Gaza. It was the name of the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod.

- *and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities*—As he continued going north along the Mediterranean coast, he preached the Gospel in Judea, in the cities of Joppa (Tel Aviv) and Lydda (Ben Gurion Airport) where Peter would soon visit.
- *until he came to Caesarea*—apparently where he and his family made their home (Acts 21:9).

Chapter 9

Verses 1-31 are about Paul, so they will be covered in Part 2 of Acts, The Ministry of Paul.

Peter Moves to the Mediterranean Coast (9:32-43)

Verse 32—*Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions*—Most likely because of the persecution in Jerusalem (8:1-2).

- *he came down*—down near the Mediterranean coast from Jerusalem, up in the hill country.
- *also to the saints who lived at Lydda*—Lydda is down in the coastal area about 10 miles south-east of Joppa (Tel Aviv). It would be west and a little north of Jerusalem. It was the Old Testament city of Lod. It was an important place because the roads from Egypt to Syria and from Joppa to Jerusalem passed through it. Today, it is the location of Israel’s international airport.

Verse 33—*There he found a man named Aeneas*—Aeneas is described as “a man” but Dorcas was called “a disciple.” This suggests that Aeneas was an unbeliever. There are no examples in the New Testament of believers being healed (though Lazarus, Dorcas, and Eutychus were raised from the dead).

- *who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed*—we don’t know if it was because of a disease or an accident, but he has had this condition for eight years, and apparently, the doctors could not heal him.

Verse 34—*Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ [not Peter] heals you; get up and make your bed.” Immediately he got up*—The healings done by Jesus and the apostles were instantaneous and total.

Verse 35—*And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon [the area around Lydda—the coastal plain out to the Mediterranean] saw him.*

- *they turned to the Lord*—Lit. “to turn around,” that is, a change of life direction.

Verse 36—*Now in Joppa*—Modern day Tel Aviv, on the Mediterranean coast.

- *there was a disciple*—a believer and a follower of Jesus Christ. The feminine of the Greek word for disciple is only found here in the New Testament.
- *named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas)*—both of these names mean “gazelle”
- *this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did*—Verse 39 says that she made many clothes, especially for the widows.

Verse 37—*And it happened at that time*—While Peter was ten miles away in Lydda, healing Aeneas.

- *that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body*—as was customary when someone died—but they did not bury her immediately, as was usually the custom (5:6, 10).
- *they laid it in an upper room*—They had an idea.

Verse 38—*Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, “Do not delay in coming to us.”*

Verse 39—*So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that*

Dorcas used to make while she was with them—Dorcas neither preached or led the new church in Joppa, but her ministry was so crucial, it impacted everyone, especially these widows.

Verse 40—*But Peter sent them all out*—As Peter had seen Jesus do when He raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:40).

- ***and knelt down and prayed***—Peter was not putting on a show in front of the people. He knew the source of power was God alone, and he presumed nothing about the will of God. Prayer acknowledges dependence on God. Peter had witnessed the importance of prayer, having seen and heard Jesus praying many times (see Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12-13).
- ***and turning to the body, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up***—

Verse 41—*And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive*—For those who loved her, the joy must have been indescribable. But that was not the only reason Dorcas was raised.

Verse 42—*It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord*—God's greater purpose in raising Dorcas was for the spread of the Gospel.

Verse 43—*And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon*—This verse is a transition to chapter 10.

One-by-one, Peter's Jewish prejudices were being worn down. First, he had to welcome the Samaritans as brothers in Christ. Now he is staying with a tanner, an occupation that was despised by the Jews because tanners dealt with the skins of dead animals. It was, therefore, considered an unclean occupation. Simon would have been shunned by the local synagogue.