

~ACTS~

Lesson 20- Serving with Boldness

We have been learning in our studies of the book of Acts what it means to stand boldly in the face of persecution with joy. In chapter 4, Peter and John stood boldly in the Truth when they were told not to speak or teach in the Name of Jesus. Last week we saw all twelve Apostles stand boldly before the Sanhedrin Council holding fast to their commitment to obey God rather than man, and how they rejoiced to suffer shame for the Name of Jesus. And today, in chapter 6, we are introduced to another faithful man who stands for Truth... even unto death, and this man's name is Stephen. In these next two chapters we see an amazing example how Stephen, being filled with the Spirit, responds with wisdom, faithfulness, and power to the violent persecution of the Sanhedrin Council against the preaching of Jesus Christ.

The Church is continuing to grow, and in chapters 6 and 7 we see three significant things happen for the first time within the body of Christ:

- 1) The first ordination of Church eldership in the appointment of seven Deacons into the ministry
- 2) The first display of the power of the Holy Spirit working in and out through a non-Apostle
- 3) The first martyr (witness) who dies for the sake of the Name of Jesus Christ.

Today we will be looking at all 15 verses in chapter 6, which is divided into two sections. The first 7 verses deal with the appointing of seven deacons into the ministry, and then the last 8 verses focus primarily on Stephen and his bold stance for Truth against the Sanhedrin. Let's start at verse 1...

1) Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Even among the persecution, true believers are continually being added to the Church. This has been happening since the Day of Pentecost. On day one, 3,000 were added to the Church, Acts 2:41 and 2:47 says the Lord continue to add to the Church daily those who were being saved; then after the lame man was healed in chapter 3, Luke tells us the Church grew to 5,000 men, not including women and young people. So we estimate by chapter 4 there were over 10,000 people in the Church. And it doesn't stop there because in 5:14 Luke says multitudes of believers continue coming to the Church. And then it expands outside of Jerusalem in 5:16 with more multitudes coming in, and now in 6:1 we see the disciples continue to multiply to the point that the Apostles need some help in the daily distribution. Because by now, scholars estimate there are at least 20,000 believers in the body of Christ.

So because of the mass amount of people coming in at such a fast rate, the Apostles are having a hard time managing the needs of the people. It's interesting to note that the problem wasn't with the supply. Evidently, they still had plenty of food and money from the people selling their possessions, but the problem now was they didn't have enough leadership in the daily distribution to the people and there arose a complaint. Luke says in verse 1, "**there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.**"

So a conflict arises between Hebrew Jews and Hellenistic Jews. What's the difference? Hebrew Jews were residents within the land of Israel, which at that time was the area known as Palestine. They were raised as Hebrew/Aramaic speaking Jews within Israel. Hebrew Jews didn't have to be born in Israel, but they had to be raised in the Holy Land. Paul was born in Tarsus, but he said himself he was *a Hebrew of Hebrews*, Phil 3:5, *brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel*, Acts 22:3. They had their own synagogues in which they read the OT Scriptures in the original Hebrew language (but even among these Hebrews the LXX had a major influence).

The Hellenists are simply Greek Jews (but they're not proselytes). They are still full blood Jews, but they had adopted the culture of the Greeks mainly because they were born and raised outside of the land of Israel. This was a result of what is called the Diaspora, Greek for "the scattering," which came from the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BC when Nebuchadnezzar captured the city of Jerusalem. And because of this dispersion, full blood Jews were being born and raised all over the world, and then 200 years later, when Alexander the Great conquered a huge part of the known world in the 4th century BC, the world began to get Hellenized into the Greek culture. The word "Greek" in the Greek language is Hellen, Ἕλληνην. So to be a Hellenized Jew, Ἑλληνιστής, means they were full blood Jews who had adopted the culture of the Greeks. Traditionally, the Hebrew Jews looked down on the Hellenistic Jews for abandoning the Hebrew culture.

Hellenists were still devout Jews who followed the Law of Moses, but they spoke and read the Bible in Greek instead of Hebrew. This is how and why the Septuagint was made. The Septuagint, the LXX, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, and it was translated in 285BC so that the Hellenistic Jews could read the Bible in their own Greek language. And this was such a good translation that even the Apostles, including the Apostle Paul, who were Hebrew Jews, and yet they still used the Septuagint as their Bible. And we know this because the majority of the OT quotations in the NT are from the LXX.

The Apostles had designed a daily distribution of provisions to the congregation, and the Hellenistic Jewish widows within the Fellowship felt like they were being neglected. This word neglected is παραθεωρέω, it literally means to compare side by side. So it seems that the Hellenistic Jews may have perceived there was some kind of preferential treatment to the Hebrew widows over the Hellenist widows. Therefore, the Apostles make some adjustments to the leadership to accommodate and service everybody's needs.

In chapter 6, there is a word that comes up three times that has significance. It is the root word διακονος. It means service or minister, but we know this word better as deacon. And Luke uses the feminine form of this word in verse 1 when he says, the daily "distribution," διακονία, or daily ministry. And in verse 2 Luke uses the verb διακονέω in describing the "serving" of tables. Therefore, the Apostles choose seven "deacons" διακονος to "serve" διακονέω in the daily "distribution" διακονία. Notice how this all centers on the idea of serving. In verses 2-4, Luke tells us the Apostles plan...

2-4) ² Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word."

Notice their main reason for appointing help is so that they can stay focused on the Word of God and prayer. This is the problem with so many churches today. They get so focused on their agenda like church growth or the "experience" of church that they forsake the foundation of the church which is Jesus Christ and His Word, even if it is for something as noble as feeding the poor and the widows, but if they leave the Word of God to do this, then it is in vain because it cuts off the source of Life. The Word is what supplies the whole congregation with Life, and without the Word, the entire church will starve. The Apostles know this, and they stay committed to the Word. The Apostles continue administering the Bread of Life, while the deacons administer the bread for the body.

And notice their plan. They tell the congregation to choose the men to do this. Verse 3... **Therefore, brethren, (you) seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.** They say you choose the men, and we will appoint them. And the Apostles lay out the criteria: they must be of good reputation, μαρτυρουμένους, literally those who were known for their witnessing character. They must be filled with the Holy Spirit, and they must be full of wisdom. This shows that the Spiritual gifts were at work even among the congregation because how else would they know who was full of the Spirit and wisdom unless they were showing the

manifestation of these gifts, 1 Cor 12:4-11. These were men whom the Spirit was working in and through just like the Apostles and we will see more of these manifestations in verse 8. So, the congregation chooses seven men from among them, and the Apostles appoint these men into the ministry, verses 5-6...

5-6) ⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶ whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

The congregation selects seven men who meet the criteria that the Apostles have established, and Luke lists the two prominent deacons first, Stephen and Philip. We will learn more about Stephen in the rest of chapter 6 and chapter 7, and Luke gives us some details on Philip's ministry in chapter 8, and in Acts 21:8 Philip is described as Philip the evangelist. This Philip is different than the Apostle Philip. The two most prominent deacons are mentioned first, but the Bible doesn't mention anything else about the other five other than what is mentioned here. The seven chosen men are brought before the twelve Apostles, the Apostles pray and lay hands on them ordaining them into the ministry, 1 Tim 4:14-15; 2 Tim 1:6; Acts 13:2-3. Now look at the results in verse 7...

7) Then the Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

The Apostles stayed faithful to the Word, and the Word of God grew, spread, *αὐξάνω*, to grow, increase, Acts 12:24; 19:20; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18; Eph 4:15. The Word of God grew and gave Life to all who believed. And the disciples continued to multiply greatly in Jerusalem, to the point that many of the priests were obedient to the faith and coming into the body of Christ. Luke doesn't give us any idea on numbers, but it seems like thousands more are getting saved. But if the Apostles would not have implemented the help of the deacons, they would have been pulled away from the Word, and it would not have had the same results.

We now begin the next section of chapter 6 that begins focusing primarily on Stephen...

8) And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Notice how Luke is describing Stephen. He is full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, v.3; full of faith and the Holy Spirit, v.5; and full of faith and dunamis power, v.8. And look at the results... He **did great wonders and signs among the people**. This is the first record of someone other than an Apostle doing wonders and signs. And then in chapter 8 we will see Philip doing miracles as well, Acts 8:6, proving that the gifts of the Spirit were not just for the Apostles. But just as the signs and wonders and preaching the Name of Jesus stirred up the unbelieving Jews in the past. Here in verse 9, they show up again to attack Stephen...

9) Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (and) Cyrenians (and) Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia, disputing with Stephen.

The NKJV puts parenthesis around these regions, making it seem like these are all included in the Synagogue of the Freedmen, but that is not correct. The KJV has it correct. The Greek places a *καί* between these countries, separating these as individual synagogues or assemblies of the Jews from those individual countries around the world. They were unbelieving Hellenistic Jews who had traveled from other parts of the world to Jerusalem, possibly because of Pentecost, or they could have also migrated to Jerusalem at some earlier time.

The Synagogue of the Freedmen were Jews from Rome because they were descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey in 63BC and then taken to Rome. Later they were granted their freedom and formed a Jewish community in Rome, naming it the Synagogue of the Freedmen, MacArthur and RCH Lenski commentary on Acts. These Hellenistic Jews with origins from these five other countries are in Jerusalem and they see the

miracles and teachings taking place by the Apostles and now with Stephen, so they rise up against him and begin making a dispute and attacking him for preaching Truth. But Luke says in verse 10...

10) And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, full of faith and power and wisdom. There was no way they could stand up to the Spirit of God flowing through this man. What exactly was disputed is not known. However, the false accusations placed against him begin revealing what they may have been discussing.

11) Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

After the Hellenistic Jews couldn't compete with the wisdom of Stephen, they resort to lies and false accusations. And so over the next several days they begin secretly inducing men, *ὑποβάλλω*, literally to cast under, to suborn, to bribe. They bribe men to start spreading false accusations. And these false accusations begin revealing the subject of what Stephen was talking about. They accused Stephen of speaking **blasphemous words against Moses and God.**

Stephen is filled with the Spirit, so we know he was preaching Jesus and discussing the final sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. That our sins are forgiven through Jesus and that Righteousness doesn't come through the Law of Moses, but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Stephen is preaching the Gospel and the Jews are hearing this and think its blasphemy against Moses. Because any talk about the fulfillment of the Law, specifically the fulfillment of the sacrifices of the Law regarding sin, would have been construed as blasphemy against Moses. So these unbelieving Jews were twisting the words of Stephen just like they did with Jesus. Luke also says they accused Stephen of speaking blasphemy toward God. This could have been Stephen proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God and God Himself, which they would have considered blasphemy against God. Over the next several days they are bribing people to spread lies and rumors in an effort to build a case to go before the Sanhedrin Council. You can tell these deceivers have a plan...

12) And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.

Stirring up the emotions of the people with lies was a common tactic with the unbelieving Jews. We saw this with Jesus, Luke 23:1; Matt 27:20, 24; Mk 15:11; here with Stephen, and we will see this constantly against the Apostle Paul, Acts 13:50; 14:2; 17:5, 13; 21:27; 25:7. The unbelieving Jews also stir up **the elders, and the scribes**. These are members of the Sanhedrin who have the authority to condemn, therefore the Hellenistic Jews, trying to find a way to convict Stephen, they finally get the ear of the Sanhedrin to come and arrest him. Luke says **they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.**

13-14) ¹³They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”

The Jews entice more false witness against Stephen, this time in front of the Sanhedrin. These are probably the same bribed men from verse 11 giving false accusations. This is the same tactic they used with Jesus. Standing Him before the Council and bribing false witnesses in order to condemn Him to death, Matt 26:59-60, and they are doing it again with Stephen.

In verse 11 they accused Stephen of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God, now they are accusing him of speaking blasphemous words against the Temple and the Law and the customs that Moses gave them. These two accusations are related because it all stems from the premise that Jesus is the final sacrifice for sin and there is no need for the Temple sacrifices in accordance with the Law. They misquote Stephen just like they misquoted Jesus. Jesus told them in **John 2:19-22**, destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days. Jesus didn't change the customs of Moses, He fulfilled them, **Matt 5:17-18**;

Heb 7:18-19; 8:13; 10:8-10. Stephen is speaking Truth, but they are misinterpreting his words and accusing him of blasphemy, when in reality, it is them who have rejected the ordinances of God and they are the ones blaspheming His Name, John 5:46.

Stephen is standing in the midst of the Council, these false accusations are being railed against him, but the whole time the glory of the Lord is radiating out from him...

15) And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

Stephen hasn't said a word yet, but the glory of God is shining out for all to see. I believe this is a physical change that everyone can see. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom, faith, and power and the Spirit of God is ready to release the convicting Truth to the Sanhedrin Council through Stephen.

The entirety of chapter 7, as we will get into next week, is Stephen's defense to these false accusations. But as Stephen begins speaking, we see the tables turn and instead of Stephen being indicted, Stephen begins convicting their hearts with the Truth. The premise to his entire speech is that they continually rejected the promises of God. And Stephen gives them a history lesson showing them that all through their history, the Jews have had a pattern of rejecting God and turning away from the Truth, **Acts 7:51-53**.

They continually rejected His prophets sent to proclaim Truth, they continually reject His ordinances foreshadowing His Truth, and now they have rejected the Truth, that Jesus is the Christ, who was the promised Messiah sent from God for the Salvation of the whole world.

As Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin Council, we see him stand boldly for Truth in the face of intense persecution and it reminds us how we must respond in the face of persecutions as well.