

Exploring Acts

The Continuing Ministry of Jesus Christ Through the Holy Spirit

Lesson 6

Day One: The Church Needs Servants

Luke continues to reveal in a very transparent way the issues of the first-century church. It was a unified congregation, grounded in the teaching and preaching of the gospel; but it was not perfect because it was filled with imperfect human beings functioning in an imperfect world. The example of Ananias and Sapphira had dawn the believers into a greater reverence for God's holiness coupled with a deeper commitment, making the church stronger than ever.

In chapters 6–7, we find a way to deal scripturally with church issues as well as how to raise up qualified candidates for leadership. We will learn that it is God who calls people to lead and that He requires both commitment and faithfulness on the part of those appointed to serve.

Acts 6 marks a transition in leadership from the dominating presence of Peter to that of the apostle Paul, who is brought into view at end of chapter 7. Peter's ministry was primarily to the Jews at Jerusalem and Paul's was to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. In between these two pillars, we are introduced to Stephen whose brief ministry catapulted the gospel out into the remainder of the world. In the hope that those who heard him would become saved, his selfless and fearless proclamation of the gospel led him to pay the ultimate price.

Read Acts 6:1–15.

Open your Bible and lesson each day by beginning with a word of prayer. Come to your time of study expectant to receive something from the Lord.

Memory verse: John 15:12–13 Write out the verse; repeat it each day to commit it to memory.

*This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.*

The explosive growth that had brought many blessings to the church now also brought some problems. Without means of mass communication, there arose some physical needs that had to be dealt with administratively. It was time for the leadership to organize and begin delegating.

A complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. These Hellenistic Jews were Greek speaking Jewish Christians who were dispersed to other countries, having assimilated the customs of the Gentile nations. The Hebrews mentioned were Aramaic speaking Jewish Christians who had never left their homeland and were steeped in Old Testament cultures and customs. These Jewish Christians detested everything associated with Gentiles and regarded the Hellenistic Jews as being contaminated through their contact with them.

1. What now becomes the priority for the disciple? v. 4

2. List the qualities that would be required for those chosen to take over the job of serving tables. v. 3
 - a. Do *you* think that these seem like high standards for such ordinary tasks? Please explain.

The requirements were: "From among you . . . of good reputation . . . full of the Spirit . . . possessing wisdom . . . to supervise." The seven chosen would become the first deacons. The word *deacon* is derived from the Greek word "to serve." These men would assist the apostles. Their responsibilities would later develop as their role became official (1 Timothy 3:8–13).

3. How were these men confirmed? Vv. 6–7
 - a. What subsequently followed and how does this reveal the necessity of orderliness in the church?

Stephen's was the first name put forth as deacon, giving us a glimpse into his standing among the other believers. He was "full"—meaning, *controlled by* the Holy Spirit, wisdom, faith and power.

4. What else do you learn about Stephen from Vv. 8–15?

5. Personal: Consider what your study in Acts 6 has taught *you* about the path of humble service. How would devoting yourself to prayer and the Word keep you as a vessel fit for the Master's use?

Day Two:

Stephen Delivers a History Lesson

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is the longest recorded in the book of Acts. With the Old Testament in view, he carefully laid out the story of God's work with the nation of Israel up to his present day. Keep in mind that this is a layman who was a true student of scripture, one who was steeped in Old Testament history and able to articulate it in relation to the Messiah—His coming, death, resurrection and, as a result, the future hope for God's people.

Deeper Discoveries ~

The historical details of Stephen's account are broken down and presented for you below. After reading the verses, challenge yourself to summarize one lesson for each passage. Look for what God was saying to His people through their circumstances about His relationship to them.

1. Abraham and the Inheritance: Vv. 1–8

God called His people out—to be set apart—in covenant relationship with Him in a land that He would give to them.

2. Joseph and Egypt: Vv. 9–16

3. God Delivers Israel by Moses: Vv. 17–38

4. Israel – Worship – and the True Temple: Vv. 39–50

5. Challenge yourself further: Stephen tied the historical relevance of the Old Testament to his witness for Christ. Can you pick one of the lessons from Stephen's message to use in sharing about *your faith* in God? (Tie it to your Christian testimony.)

He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.
(Acts 17:26–27)

Day Three:

Stephen the Martyr

Read Acts 7:51–60.

Luke described Stephen as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit (v. 5), and that he was also “full of God’s grace and power” (v. 8 NIV). These qualifications allowed him to not only lead but also do signs and wonders. God’s anointing had enabled him to argue passionately against his opposition, who ultimately labeled him as a blasphemer.

Toward the end of Stephen’s message, the pronoun used switches from “our” to “you,” as he refers to his audience as “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart and ears, always resisting the Holy Spirit.” Their ancestors had persecuted and murdered those who prophesied of Jesus’ coming; and now his generation had done the same to their Messiah. But Stephen never finished his address, he was abruptly attacked while accusing them of their sin. Stephen hoped that they would recognize it and turn toward repentance.

1. In your own words, write your observations about the scene before you in Vv. 54–60.

- a. The crowd’s response: _____

- b. What Stephen saw? _____

- c. Stephen’s heart attitude toward their actions: _____

Luke tells us the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. He, too, had some role in the execution.

2. Stephen fell to his knees and uttered what words similar to those of Jesus?

Up to this point, we have seen three trials presented in the book of Acts: the first ending in threats (chapter 4), the second in beatings (chapter 5), and the third in death (chapter 7). Stephen becomes the first person martyred for his faith in Christ but he will not be the last. When he had prayed for his murderers he “fell asleep.” The Greek word used is *ekoimethe*, from which we derive the word *cemetery*. The Bible teaches that when Christians die they are not gone; they are “asleep” until Jesus wakes them up. The Apostle Paul will later write that for believers to be *absent from the body is to be present with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:8).

A key word in this passage is “Son of Man” (v. 56). This is the only time in the New Testament this is spoken by anyone other than Jesus. Stephen saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Did Jesus stand to honor and welcome this martyr home? We don’t know. But we do know from Stephen’s message and his prayer for his killers that he embodied the same attitude of forgiveness and service that Jesus did.

3. What words in Matthew 20:27–28 convey the heart essence of God’s servant? What can you take away from this example for your own service?

Day Four:

In His Footsteps

Could you love your enemies in the face of your imminent death? If stones were being hurled at you in rage, would you be able to pray for those desiring your destruction? Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit: “And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59–60).

The dictionary defines *enemy* as an adversary or foe. It denotes one who opposes or vies with another; one who manifests ill will; or one whose relation to us is likely to provoke ill feeling. These may include others who oppose our ideas, who contend with our decisions, who engage in vindicating their supposed rights against us, whose material interests clash with our own, and who have spoken out against us or taken steps to injure us. Perhaps today you find yourself in a situation where you are dealing with an *enemy* and you don’t know what to do next.

Jesus would tell you to follow in His footsteps and love that person. Is that a hard path to follow? Most certainly, in fact it would be absolutely impossible apart from the Holy Spirit.

Look Closer ~

Turn to Matthew 5:43–48. Here we find the signposts on the path we as believers are to follow. What does Jesus say should be the believer’s response to each of the assaults below? v. 44

- a. Those who are *your* enemies?
- b. Those who curse *you*?
- c. Those who hate *you*?
- d. Those who spitefully use and persecute *you*?
- e. When *you* follow this pattern, how does God view you? v. 45
- f. Think about it: Why is it so important that *you*, as a child of God, exhibit behavior that is different from those who don’t know Jesus Christ?
- g. If the Lord has pointed out someone through your study today that *you* need to begin loving, write down that person’s name and begin to pray for them.

G. Campbell Morgan said of Jesus: *He loved His enemies. He did good to them that hated Him. He blessed them that cursed Him. He prayed for those that spitefully used Him. When they smote Him on the cheek, He turned the other. When they tore away His coat and gambled for it, He made no protest. The Master is the Revelation and Interpretation of His own law. I cannot live there, save in the measure in which my life is His life, interpreted to me, realized within me, manifested through me, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.*”

Day Five: Selah . . . Pause and Ponder the Week in Review

This section of the lesson is intended to be an at-a-glance, user-friendly recap of what you've learned this week. Go back over your lesson with a marking pen or highlighter and mark what stands out to you. Use the margins to make personal notations. Be sure to indicate which points or questions you'd like to share in your discussion group.

1. What is your take-away-truth? How are you working to make it a part of your daily walk?

2. Write out this week's verse from memory.

3. What does this week's verse reveal to you?

4. Personal: Which of the behaviors mentioned in Matthew 5 about *loving your enemies* are you having the greatest struggle with right now? Compose a prayer asking God to help.

Prayer Time: Write down the people in your group to keep in prayer this next week.
