

## Acts 6

- Today we begin the story of Stephen
  - Commonly known as the first martyr of the Church
    - He was also the first deacon
    - And deacons have traditionally played the role of martyr ever since
  - The story has two parts or divisions, which follow neatly in two chapters
    - Chapter 6 tells the story of why and how Stephen received his appointment as well as Stephen's witnessing of the Gospel
    - Chapter 7 covers Stephen's martyrdom, including his famous monologue summarizing God's plan for redemption
      - At the end of 7 we also see a hint of Luke's second main character in the book of Acts
      - Stephen's story becomes the link between Luke's protagonist in the first part of Acts (Peter) and his protagonist in the second half of the story (Paul)
- To start, we need to finish the final two verses of chapter 5, which sets the stage for the events of chapter 6

[Acts 5:41](#) So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

[Acts 5:42](#) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

- After the second trial and flogging of the apostles, they went back to the brethren
  - They had been beaten and threatened with more severe punishment
  - Yet they left rejoicing
    - The reason for rejoicing was the way the Lord had counted them worthy to suffer shame for His Name
    - Jesus Himself had told the disciples that they would be blessed when persecuted

[Matt. 5:10](#) ¶ “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[Matt. 5:11](#) ¶ “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

[Matt. 5:12](#) ¶ “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- The disciples knew this, and as persecution came upon the apostles, they naturally rejoiced
  - Truly, it was an honor
    - The honor comes from how God is using our life to mirror His Son’s life, in particular mirroring His sacrificial death
    - Not every Christian is granted this honor
    - And the Apostles rejoiced at having been counted worthy for that honor
  - God purposes in granting it now and in this way seems to be preparation for what will follow in chapter 6
    - The leaders of the early Church were the Apostles
    - But the Apostles were hardly the only ones who would suffer persecution
      - And God has determined not to bring the Apostles to death too quickly, since they were needed to build this early church
    - So it stands to reason that other disciples would be appointed to be among the first to die
    - That leads us into chapter 6, where we encounter Stephen
- So the Apostles gladly ignored the command of the council and kept teaching and preaching, which kept growing the church

[Acts 6:1](#) ¶ Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, 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.

[Acts 6:2](#) So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

[Acts 6:3](#) "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

[Acts 6:4](#) "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

[Acts 6:5](#) The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

[Acts 6:6](#) And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

- So at this time the church is growing
  - And with growth comes growing pains
    - Christians are people, and anytime people gather, relationship difficulties can develop
    - And the solution to disunity is strong leadership
  - Here we're witnessing the second example of internal threats to unity within the early church (the first being Ananias and Sapphira)
    - A complaint arose, but the term in Greek is *goggusmos*, which means to murmur or secretly complain
    - It tells us that discontent was percolating and threatening to erupt into something more serious
  - The two groups involved were Jews from different origins
    - The first group are Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews
      - They came from outside the land of Israel and have returned to settle in Jerusalem
    - The second group are Hebrews
      - Which means they are Jews from within the land who speak Hebrew and Aramaic
    - There was long history of tension between these groups
      - Hebrews were more conservative and a bit haughty
      - Hellenistic Jews were more liberal and less likely to following the Law

- Both of these groups had their respective widows
  - Widows were especially vulnerable members of society, and the church placed an emphasis on showing respect for widows
    - This may have been one reason why the church stood out positively in the culture
    - Especially against the backdrop of the Pharisees, who showed no regard for widows despite requirements in the Law to do so
  - The church supported widows by taking collections and distribution money and food to the widows to support them
- Somewhere along the way, this process began to fail
  - The widows of the local Hebrew Jews were receiving a disproportionate share of the support
    - The text says that the widows of the Hellenistic Jews were being overlooked or shortchanged
    - How would something like this arise? Who would have instigated it or permitted it?
      - Today, we would assume it was the fault of a church leader who was biased or incompetent
    - But at this point in the church's history, there are only the apostles in leadership
      - And we know the Apostles weren't the kind of men to condone this type of favoritism
      - So we can rule out the possibility that they were the cause of the favoritism
  - That means that the unfair distribution of food was the result of the congregation itself conducting the distribution in a biased fashion in favor of the Hebrew widows
    - It's likely that the greater number of Jews in the Jerusalem Church were Hebrew
    - So the majority of the church body probably favored the Hebrew widows naturally resulting in the unfair distribution

- And when the Hellenistic widows raised a complaint, a dispute arose
- We can see a pattern emerging here in Luke's account
  - The enemy works to divide the church over temptations of money, possessions and honor or pride
    - Think Ananias and Sapphira
  - Or he works to intimidate the brethren through persecution
    - Which forms the second half of Stephen's story
- This incident highlighted to the Apostles the need for additional leadership in the church to watch over the flock
  - So in response to the argument, the Apostles act
    - They bring the entire church together and announce the need for additional leaders
      - The reason for additional leaders is obvious
      - The needs of the church had grown beyond the capability of 12 men to handle everything
  - The Apostles express the need by saying it is not desirable (or pleasing) for them to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables
    - Let's consider what the Apostles are proposing
    - First, the word pleasing suggests that the apostles know there is an audience watching their actions
      - The audience is the Lord, of course,
    - Secondly, the thing that will displease the Lord is neglecting the word of God for lessor
      - The highest levels of leadership in the church were to be primarily - if not exclusively - devoted to teaching God's word
  - To do otherwise would not be pleasing to God's word

- Even something as important and loving as feeding helpless widows was not as important as teaching God's word
- Obviously, the need still had to be met, which is why the Apostles move to appoint deacons
  - But it's worth remembering that the model presented here is that the role of a congregational leader - pastor - is to teach God's word
  - And nothing should come before that duty (they were to be "devoted" to prayer and the word)
    - Other duties should be performed by other leaders
    - In my opinion, the pastor's weekly schedule should be dominated by teaching and preparation for teaching
- So the apostle bring the congregation together and announce the decision
  - The announcement makes clear three things to the congregation
    - Teaching God's word is preeminent in the church
    - Other needs will be met by other (lessor) leaders
    - These leaders have the backing of the Apostles
  - The selection process was also placed in the hands of the congregation
    - Though we remember that Acts was not written as a manual for church operation, nevertheless this practice is consistent with Paul's instruction in 1Tim and Titus
      - Suggesting that this practice for identifying leaders is intended to be a model
    - Here's the model
      - The pastoral leadership of a church is a plurality of teachers with manifest authority to conduct the church's affairs
        - They are not beholden to the congregation

- The sheep do not lead the shepherd
- Since we do not have Apostles today, we refer to these leaders as elders
  - Paul told Titus to appoint elders

[Titus 1:5](#) ¶ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

- So a shepherd appoints elders, based on their qualification to teach
  - The congregation selects deacons
  - Leadership from among themselves to minister to the other needs of the body
- These lesser leaders also have qualifications, as Paul outlines in 1Tim and Titus
  - Here the qualifications are good reputation, the anointing of the Spirit
    - Reputation is martureo or witness or testimony
      - They must have a life and walk in faith that bears witness to godliness
      - It wraps up all that Paul outlines later in his letters
    - Then they must be full of the Spirit, which means having a life obviously under the control and direction of the Spirit
      - One thing (Spirit-led life) leads to the other (good reputation)
- The seven men selected are an interesting group
  - First, Stephen gets the most attention, because of his later focus in the chapter
    - Phillip is listed second because of his role in chapter 8
    - The rest have no further mention in the Bible
  - All the names are Greek, indicating they were Hellenistic Jews

- And one of them, Nicolas, was a Greek who converted to Judaism
- This shows that the election of the deacons was clearly under the Spirit's direction
  - We might have expected at least an even distribution of Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews
    - Or even a predominantly Hebrew selection
  - But it was all Hellenistic Jews, showing that the Spirit was working to correct for the biases in the group
- Finally, they were confirmed in their ministry with a laying on of hands
  - This is an important step
    - The men are nominated by the congregation but appointed by the Apostles (elders)
  - And the laying on of hands symbolically represents the anointing work of the Spirit
    - All authority and power for ministry comes from the Spirit
- Now look at the result of this step

[Acts 6:7](#) ¶ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

- The word of God kept spreading because the Apostles were freed from other responsibilities
  - This in turn led to the further increase of the church - and exceeding number
- And now a new element
  - Priests, one after another, were coming into the faith
  - This is a remarkable footnote, because the priests of that day would have been Sadducees, since the Sadducees were in power during this time
    - And we see God adding to the church from among the ranks of their enemy in the city

- And this revelation is likely the cause of the next episode of external threat to the church

[Acts 6:8](#) ¶ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

[Acts 6:9](#) But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

[Acts 6:10](#) But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

[Acts 6:11](#) Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

[Acts 6:12](#) And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.

[Acts 6:13](#) They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;

[Acts 6:14](#) for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

- Stephen is working in the full power of the Spirit
  - And he has evidently received supernatural power to perform miracles and teach with authority
    - We know in chapter 8 that Phillip has been given similar powers, so apparently the seven deacons were equipped in a similar fashion
    - Stephen and Phillip are clearly not capable of these things prior to their appointment, so the power traces to the Apostles
  - This is an example of how the Apostles were able to appoint others to perform miracles
    - But these seven are never shown transferring those same powers further
    - It stopped with them because it had to originate with Apostles
  - Secondly, notice that Stephen is not depicted waiting tables
    - No doubt he did his fair share of table waiting, but it's also likely that he and the other seven appointed others to that task
    - They were deacons, leaders

- This meant they had responsibilities to lead and run the congregation
- Stephen encounters a group of Hellenistic Jews and proceeds to present the truth of the Gospel to them from Scripture while in a synagogue
  - This is the first example of the disciples preaching inside synagogues
    - Paul later made this his usual practice in every new city he visited
    - He brought the gospel to the Jew first, seeking the remnant, but then quickly moved to the Gentiles, his primary calling
  - Luke identifies these men as members of the Synagogue of Freedmen
    - Jewish records indicate there were somewhere between 390-480 different synagogues in the city of Jerusalem
      - This synagogue was founded by formerly enslaved Jews, who returned to the city
    - Other groups involved were
      - Cyrenians, which were Jews from North Africa
      - Alexandrians which Jews from Egypt
      - Cilicia, which were Jews from Turkey
        - This last group included Tarsus, which was Saul's (Paul) hometown
        - Perhaps Saul was in this group unable to argue against Stephen's wisdom
- Since the men couldn't win the argument, their pride was injured and their anger turned to conspiracy
  - So they stirred up others to spread rumors and lies
    - They accused Stephen of blasphemy
      - The literal blasphemy under Jewish law was speaking the name of God, which Stephen had not done
      - Instead they said he spoke against Moses and God, probably because he proclaimed the end of the Law

- This led to the Elders dragging Stephen away and bring him to the Council for yet another inquest
- Stephen is accused before the council of two offenses
  - Declaring the end of the Temple
    - Likely a repetition of Jesus' own words, referring to the replacing of the house of stone with the Temple of the Body of Christ
    - This charge would have been an offense to the Sadducees who operated and protected the Temple grounds
  - Secondly, he is accused of destroying the customs of the Law from Moses
    - Certainly, this refers to the end of the Law now that grace has come in Jesus Christ
    - This charge would have incited the minority party on the council, the Pharisees
  - So the charges against Stephen are designed to make everyone mad at him
    - This sets the stage for Stephen's persecution