

“Living in Faith”

Devotional Reading: Deuteronomy 28:1-14 **Background Scripture:** Acts 6

Acts 6:7–15 (NIV)

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To state the charges against Stephen and their basis.
- **Biblical Principle:** To critique the tactics used by Stephen’s opponents.
- **Daily Application:** To evaluate various ways of responding or reacting when you face opposition to Jesus today.

INTRODUCTION

Sacred Space

In church and worship facilities, there is usually a room called the “sanctuary.” It usually contains pews or other seating, a pulpit, and other elements for worship. Each week, that room serves as the location for worship services, and certain behaviors are deemed unacceptable there.

These expectations serve as a way to honor God although there is nothing holy about that room in and of itself. We believe that God dwells in His people (1 Corinthians 3:16), not buildings (Acts 17:24). But sanctuaries are set aside as a sacred space to honor and worship Him, nonetheless.

Violation of the sacred space of the temple in Jerusalem was a severe matter to first-century Jewish leaders. An accusation of such a violation would lead to harsh consequences.

LESSON CONTEXT: First-Century Church

After Jesus’ ascension, the number of believers increased and were “added” to the numbers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47b; 5:14; 6:1). The expanding number of believers led them to develop habits for their gatherings and expectations for how they would treat each other (see 2:42–47a; 4:32–35).

During that time, almost all believers were ethnically Jewish. However, not all had the same cultural upbringing. Some had lived in the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire, while others lived in Jewish regions of Palestine. The differences between these groups of first-century Jews led to conflict regarding the treatment of widows (Acts 6:1). As a result, the apostles faced challenges while trying to oversee the church (6:2).

To ease the load for the apostles, they selected seven men to handle specific tasks (see Acts 6:3–4). The book of Acts mentions two of these seven men in further detail: Philip (8:4–40) and Stephen (6:8–8:1). In some ways, the role of these seven men was analogous to the position of deacon (see 1 Timothy 3:8–13). The word *deacon* comes from the Greek noun *diakonos*, which is not used in Acts 6. However, a variation of that word does appear in Acts 6 and is translated as “ministry” (Acts 6:4). The term describes some aspects of the work of the apostles.

LESSON CONTEXT: The Jerusalem Temple

For first-century Judaism, the temple in Jerusalem served as the faith's physical and spiritual center. The temple complex was the focus of the people's worship and served as the headquarters for religious leadership.

Several versions of the Jewish temple existed. Construction on the first began in about 966 B.C. during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 6:1). After 13 years, Solomon's Temple was completed (7:1) and dedicated (1 Kings 8). During his reign, the temple became a place to worship God and store valuable artifacts. As such, it was a notable place for enemy forces to plunder (example: 14:25–28).

In 597 B.C., the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, took the people into exile, and looted Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 24:10–14). In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple and took the remaining artifacts from the temple (25:8–17).

There were attempts to rebuild this place of worship. In 538 B.C., the Persian king Cyrus allowed Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see Ezra 1:1–4; 6:1–12; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). Under the oversight of Zerubbabel (see Ezra 3:2, 8; 4:2), construction faced delays. Eventually, it was finished, and the temple was dedicated in 515 B.C. (see 5:1–6:22). That temple—sometimes called Zerubbabel's Temple—was smaller and less impressive than the temple of Solomon's day (see Haggai 2:3).

In 63 B.C., Roman general Pompey desecrated the temple and its sacred artifacts. Although in shambles, the temple was not entirely demolished. It needed renovation and restoration.

The temple mentioned in the Gospels was the one renovated by Herod the Great (reigned 47–4 B.C.). Work on that temple began in around 20 B.C. (compare John 2:20). Construction on the temple complex was completed in about AD 64. The first-century Jewish leaders were not about to let anyone else again defile their holy place. They were especially not going to allow anyone to speak harshly about the building and its associated customs.

The Growing Church: Acts 6:7–10

Verse 7 reveals two important aspects regarding the growth of the first-century church. First, the church's development was caused by the dramatic spread of *the word of God* (see also Acts 12:24; 19:20). As the influence of the gospel message *spread* among people, so did *the number of disciples*. When the gospel falls on willing hearts, spiritual fruit will result, often in multiples (see Luke 8:8, 15).

Second, that their number *increased rapidly* implies that the *Jerusalem* church underwent rapid numerical growth. Comparing the number of believers in the first chapters of the book of Acts reveals this expansion (see Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4).

Counted among these believers were *priests*. These men served in the temple when their lot was chosen (example: Luke 1:5, 8–10). The text does not indicate how many priests numbered in *a large number*. The first-century historian Josephus estimated that there were 20,000 priests at the time. We can assume that the number of believers among the priesthood numbered at least in the hundreds. Only a short time had passed since Jesus' ascension, but the gospel message found fertile soil for growth in Jerusalem.

1. What caused the growth in the first-century church in Acts 6:7?

What Do You Think?

How do you follow the Spirit's leading in spreading the Word to make disciples in your neighborhood?

Digging Deeper

How can your congregation be a conduit for the spread of the gospel in your neighborhood and town?

Great wonders and signs had been attributed to Jesus (John 2:11; 11:46–47; Acts 2:22) and the apostles (2:43; 5:12). When the apostles did these things, it confirmed the presence of God's grace and the empowerment of His servants (see 2 Corinthians 12:12).

The book of Acts states that Stephen also was *full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people*. And although Stephen was not an apostle, God had chosen him to give witness to salvation (compare Hebrews 2:3–4). Stephen was “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). His life demonstrated the spiritual *power* that had been promised by Jesus (1:8).

2. How was Stephen described? (Acts 6:8)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can believers develop spiritual power?

Digging Deeper

How can mature believers leverage their power (act effectively) to encourage the spiritual growth of newer believers?

After the exile that began in 586 B.C., the need arose for synagogues among the Jewish people. These were locations for prayer and teaching of Scripture (examples: Matthew 4:23; Acts 13:14–15; 15:21).

Paul tells of the existence of more than one synagogue in Jerusalem (Acts 24:11–12). Therefore, it is possible that the groups mentioned in this verse each attended different synagogues. They all, however, had a certain dispute with Stephen.

Freedmen were Jewish people who had been liberated from slavery or who were descendants of those freed. These people were different from freeborn citizens of the Roman Empire who had never experienced enslavement. Other groups included *Jews of Cyrene* from northern Africa, *Jews of Alexandria* in Egypt, and people from *Cilicia* and *Asia*, both located in modern-day Turkey.

Stephen's teachings gave these groups a reason to *argue with him*. If he had only performed miracles and served food (Acts 6:2–3), it is unlikely that these groups would have had any dispute. However, what led to conflict with the synagogue members were his words.

Stephen undoubtedly followed Peter and John in proclaiming God's salvation in Jesus the Messiah (compare Acts 3:12–26). However, the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem did not want anyone to preach that message (4:13–18). Jesus' promises to His followers regarding opposition (Luke 21:12–15) were coming true.

3. What groups had an altercation with Stephen? Why? (Acts 6:9)

That the synagogue members *could not stand up against* Stephen does not mean that they agreed with that message. Rather, they had no answer to his teachings. They had opposed the leading of God's Spirit. Nobody could match or resist Stephen's wisdom and power (see Luke 21:15).

Stephen was chosen because he was "full of the Spirit and *wisdom*" (Acts 6:3). His irrefutable words were a direct fulfillment of Jesus' promises to His disciples (Luke 21:15).

4. How did the synagogue members react to Stephen's preaching? (Acts 6:10)

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to ensure that your speech is filled with wisdom?

Digging Deeper

How do Proverbs 15:1–2; Ephesians 4:29–32; Colossians 4:5–6; and James 1:19; 3:13–18 inform your answer?

The Emboldened Opposition: Acts 6:11–15

Stephen's wisdom did not sit well with the religious leaders. Unable to win an argument with him, they took a different approach to quiet him. Certain *men* were secretly persuaded (*suborned*) to speak up against Stephen regarding his teachings. These false witnesses stirred up the people by saying that Stephen spoke *blasphemous words* against Moses, God, the holy place, and the law of Moses.

The charge of *blasphemous words* had severe consequences for Stephen. The Law of Moses prohibited blasphemous language *against God* and the leaders of Israel (Exodus 20:7; 22:28).

The *Sanhedrin* was a 70-member "supreme court" for matters regarding Jewish law. The group consisted of chief priests, *elders*, and *teachers of the law* (Mark 15:1). Members of the Sadducees and Pharisees were also likely part of the council to some extent (see Acts 23:6). The group carried significant influence in first-century Judaism. They had the power to level consequences for offenders of the law (John 9:22). Any claim that would have *stirred up the people* and the religious leaders would have been significant.

The Sanhedrin met in a chamber connected to the temple. The charge that they heard was that Stephen was preaching threats *against this holy place*. In the view of the Sanhedrin, this was a *blasphemous* act by Stephen. Blasphemy was a severe offense with serious consequences (also see Leviticus 24:10–16).

5. What scheme did the religious leaders come up with to silence Stephen? (Acts 6:11-13)

Their claims had a grain of truth. *Jesus* had indeed prophesied regarding the destruction of *this place*, the temple (Luke 21:5–6). He had also proclaimed, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). The apostle John, however, interpreted this statement as a metaphor for Jesus’ body (2:21).

Jesus never claimed that He himself would be the one to destroy the temple. However, He had faced charges similar to the ones brought before Stephen (Matt. 26:60–61; 27:40; Mark 14:57–58). The point of Jesus’ teachings was to serve as prophetic reminders of the temporary nature of the temple (Matt. 24:18–25). In A.D. 70, Jesus’ prophecies regarding the temple were fulfilled when Roman commander Titus destroyed the temple.

As far as changing their “customs” (v. 14 of today’s lesson), some of the customs described in the Law of *Moses* included circumcision (Leviticus 12:3) and dietary practices (see Leviticus 11; 17). These things were a way for the Jewish people to separate themselves from Gentiles. Therefore, any teachings regarding a *change* to these things would affect their unique identity as a people.

Jesus’ teaching transformed or set aside these customs. One way is found in His teaching on food and spiritual defilement. The Law of Moses indicates that consuming certain foods makes a person unclean (Leviticus 11; 17). However, Jesus taught that what a person eats does not lead to defilement (Matthew 15:17–20; Mark 7:14–23).

Jesus did not seek to abolish the Law of Moses. Instead, His teachings and entire ministry fulfilled the law and the other writings of Scripture (Matthew 5:17). All parts of Hebrew Scripture—the writings of Moses, the prophets, the psalms, and the wisdom literature—served as guideposts that point people to Jesus. Rather than nullify these Scriptures, Jesus fulfilled them through His life, death, and resurrection (see Luke 24:27, 44).

The charges regarding Stephen’s teachings (see Acts 6:14a–14b) were intended to unify the factions (cliques, often secretly seeking power) of the Sanhedrin against him. The temple was the primary economic engine of Jerusalem. It provided wealth for many people (example: Matthew 21:12). Because Sadducees were elite members of the priesthood, they benefited from the wealth created by the temple.

The Pharisees, however, were on board for different reasons. Their interpretations of the law depended on their traditions (example: Mark 7:3–4). The prospect of the temple’s destruction and the law’s annulment threatened the power and influence of these parties. This threat to vested interests was what motivated the arrest of Jesus as well (John 11:48).

6. What charges were brought against Stephen regarding his teachings about Jesus? (Acts 6:14)

It was not even necessary for Stephen to speak in order to give witness, for the very glow on his face told everybody that he was a servant of God. Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin would recall Moses’ shining face (Exodus 34:29-30). It was as though God was saying, “This man is not against Moses! He is like Moses—he is My faithful servant!”

The phrase *the face of an angel* highlights the supernatural nature of the expression on Stephen’s face, along with the fact that they were looking *intently* at his facial glow should have been a clue to the divine approval of his teachings.

Nevertheless, Stephen began his speech (and history lesson) to the Sanhedrin by referring to “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2, not in today’s lesson). As he concluded, Stephen’s first view of Heaven would be to see “the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God” (7:55). That vision was the final straw for the Sanhedrin as he was stoned to death by mob action (7:56–8:1a).

7. What was Stephen’s reaction to the false testimony? (Acts 6:15)

What Do You Think?

How do your actions, attitudes, and expressions indicate to others that you are a follower of Christ?

Digging Deeper

What are the limitations to judging spiritual status based on outward markers?

CONCLUSION

Divine Service

What should the Christian's response be to attacks and insults to faith? Such attacks might include name-calling, harsh remarks, or judgment regarding our use of time, energy, and resources. These abuses might even come from coworkers, friends, or family members.

The verbal attacks on Stephen led to a physical attack that resulted in his death. It is unlikely that we will experience the same end as Stephen. However, his manner of living can inform our behavior—whether or not attacks on our faith result.

Stephen was a student of Scripture, demonstrated by his speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2–54). Not only did he know the *facts* of Scripture, but he also knew how Jesus *fulfilled* all of Scripture. This knowledge led him to display confidence and hope during his interaction with the Sanhedrin. He proclaimed the gospel with the hope that they would believe in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

Most of all, Stephen faced his final crisis with peace and poise. He displayed a sense of peace that comes from a knowledge of God's will and power. The false accusations did not deter Stephen; he trusted that it was all a part of God's plan.

Consider the example of Stephen the next time you pray. Ask the Lord for wisdom, power, and peace. When we practice and display these attributes, we can better serve the Lord, especially in the face of criticism or attacks from the world.

What Do You Think?

How does the lesson inform your thoughts and behaviors for the upcoming Holy Week?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to seek God's wisdom, power, and peace as you invite someone to Easter services?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You are the God of wisdom, power, and peace. Give us the wisdom to know how to navigate a world that increasingly despises You. Show us the power of Your Spirit at work in and through us. Fill us with peace to face whatever circumstances we might face. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God's wisdom, power, and peace will overcome the harshest opponents.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "The Resurrection: Key to Faith" and summarizes the women's encounter at Jesus' empty tomb. Study Mark 16.