

Turning the World Right-side Up: Study 5, Acts 6-7

Acts Studies for Teens by Mike Apodaca, MA



Begin with prayer for wisdom from God and for the presence of the Spirit.

Note: In a Bible Study, as much as possible ask the questions and let the students answer. Where they cannot, you supply the answer and keep everything flowing.

Introduction: Are we ready to share the gospel openly?

Section 1: Representative Government: Chapters 6:1-7

6 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

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

The church began with Jews. Sociologically, there were two main divisions among the Jews: 1) Those who were Jews by birth (Hebrews), and 2) Those who were Jews by conversion (Hellenistic, or Greek). As we saw in the last couple of chapters, the church was taking care of those who had no means of self-support (this would include widows). It was an early form of welfare. The converted Jews began to complain because their widows were not receiving support the same way the Jewish widows were. This was a serious issue which could have split the early church along racial lines.

The Apostles recognize that the problem stems from the fact that the Hebrews don't really know the Greek widows. They need someone in leadership who knows them and their needs. The solution is to bring Hellenistic Jews into leadership.

The Apostles do not choose these representatives—they leave this up to the Hellenistic Jews. The only criterion they insist on is that they are full of the Spirit and wisdom. Notice again how important a Spirit-filled life is. Wisdom is a deep understanding of how to solve

problems. The Apostles endorsed these men by laying hands on them.

Lastly, notice what the Apostles are up to. The work of an Apostle is to pray and minister to the Word. This was also the work of Jesus.

Digging Deeper: Acts 6:3

Let's consider what makes for real leaders in the church of God:

The table waiters: Those who were to administrate the distribution of the food to the poor.

The qualifications for this responsibility was to be filled with the Spirit and with wisdom. We could say this is the basic responsibility for all those who would do any job in the church.

Filled with the Spirit: In the truest sense, this is a person who is a container for the Spirit. When you interact with them, you are interacting with the Spirit of God infused through them. We could use the word, saturated.

Wisdom: The work would require problem solving and making sound judgments. This is the best kind of worker, one who can do the work intelligently, making good decisions with good outcomes.

The Apostles:

The work of the Apostles is two-fold: 1) Prayer—This was probably personal prayer where they communed with God, experiencing His presence, and lifted up the church. It could also have been the leading of prayer meetings and praying over the sick. The leaders of God's church should invest a great amount of their ministry to prayer. 2) Ministry of the Word—This is preaching and teaching.

Section 2: What Full of the Spirit and Wisdom Looks Like: Chapters 6:8-15

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.

Stephen is a wonderful representative of the Kingdom. He is full of God's grace (God's undeserved forgiveness) and power (God working through the believer to heal or do miracles). He was opposed by Jews who had been taken to Rome as slaves, then later freed. They were in Jerusalem for the Feasts. They debated with Stephen, but could not stand against the wisdom God gave him through the Spirit—we see some of the wisdom in the next section. The arrest of Stephen reminds us of the arrest of Jesus. In fact, Jesus was also brought before the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin.

Luke ends this section with this description of Stephen's countenance. We see this same thing with Moses (Exodus 34:29-30) and with Jesus (Matthew 17:2). Stephen was so thoroughly God's, the very divine radiance shined through him.

Section 3: Stephen's Wisdom: Chapters 7:1-53

7 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

²To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. ³'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'^[b]

⁴"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. ⁵He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough

ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. ⁶God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. ⁷But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' ⁸Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

¹¹"Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. ¹²When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. ¹³On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. ¹⁴After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in

all. ¹⁵ Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. ¹⁶ Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

¹⁷ "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. ¹⁸ Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.'^[a] ¹⁹ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

²⁰ "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child.^[a] For three months he was cared for by his family. ²¹ When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²² Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

²³ "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites.²⁴ He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. ²⁵ Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. ²⁶ The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying,

'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?'

²⁷ "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? ²⁸ Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'^[a] ²⁹ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

³⁰ "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. ³¹ When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'^[a] Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

³³ "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'^[a]

³⁵ "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ He led them out of Egypt and

performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

³⁷“This is the Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.’^[u] ³⁸He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

³⁹“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’⁴¹ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. ⁴²But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

⁴³You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship.

Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.

⁴⁴“Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had

been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶who enjoyed God’s favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

⁴⁸“However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

⁴⁹“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

⁵⁰Has not my hand made all these things?’^[m]

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—
⁵³you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

Stephen understands the entire Old Testament as being about Jesus. Jesus is the lens that makes sense out of these past events. Stephen explains that there were always two groups in the Old

Testament: 1) Those who stood with God and what He was doing in Israel and, 2) Those who rejected God, clinging to the old ways or turning to the false gods of the people around them.

Notice how he breaks it down:

God began Israel with the promise to Abraham. He had to leave his home and follow God.	This is also happening now in Jerusalem—God is calling His people to leave behind their old ways and follow Him.
The 11 sons of Jacob are jealous of Joseph, but he was full of wisdom.	The Jewish leaders are jealous of the church.
Moses was rejected by the people. He was a deliverer who did Signs and Wonders and predicted another One like him would come.	Jesus is also rejected by the leaders of the Jews in His day.
Moses received living Words from God, but was rejected by the people, who wanted to turn back to the old ways and old gods.	Notice, Stephen is not against the Law, as he was charged. He has a high view of the words of God. He shows that the Jews did not receive the Word, they rebelled.
God was in their midst in the Tabernacle and Temple, but they still rejected Him.	God was right there. His glory had descended in the Tabernacle and Temple. Even so, Jesus was God’s temple and now the church is the temple of God.
The prophets who predicted the coming of the Christ were persecuted.	Those in the church who are witnessing to Jesus are being persecuted.

Stephen now explains that the Jews before him are in the group of those who have historically rejected the work of God. They are grouped with the brothers who sold Joseph, the Jews who rejected Moses and turned to idols, the Jews who rejected God when He was in their midst. They consistently reject the Holy Spirit and His work.

Section 4: The Jews Prove Stephen Right: Chapters 7:54-60

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

The Sanhedrin, powerful Jewish leaders who are used to people kissing their backsides, are appalled by what they hear.

Stephen is completely in Christ—more tuned to heaven than to earth. He has completely given himself to the Spirit. Heaven opens for him and he sees God’s glory and Jesus standing. Some have suggested that Jesus is standing to receive the first martyr.

To the Jews this is the supreme blaspheme—Stephen has placed Jesus at God’s right hand in heaven. Even though these same men did not dare kill Jesus for fear of the Jews when they suggested that He had blasphemed, now they have heard it for themselves.

This is more than they can stand. In a frenzied rage they take Stephen out and stone him. They leave their coats at the feet of Saul, who was in full agreement with what they were doing.

Like Jesus, Stephen commits his spirit to God and asks Him to forgive his executioners for this horrible sin.

What have we learned?

Jesus begins a standing ovation for Stephen that all believers must join in. He is a great role model of Christian character. He was full of the Spirit and wisdom. He saw the Old Testament through the lens of what God was doing in Christ. Most importantly, Stephen was not afraid. He did not cower before powerful men. He had confidence, just as Jesus had before him. Stephen was not surprised when the leaders picked up stones to stone him. He expected it. But this didn’t keep him from telling the truth. With the truth before them, even these leaders could have repented and been saved. By the Spirit, he was God’s voice to them. In this Scripture we see the first martyr for Christ. But there would be many to follow. Being filled with the Spirit, standing solely for Christ, will have a cost. There will be those who will try to stop us. May we have Stephen’s boldness.

What this Means for Us

The church is not a playground, it is battle training. Christians are behind enemy lines, “tenting where the enemy rules.”¹ This earth is in control of the Evil one. He has twisted the minds of men into many idolatries and sin and away from God’s glorious light. Whenever the light shines brightly and challenges Satanic strongholds, there will be a backlash. This is normal.

How do we prepare for ridicule and physical violence? First we need to walk in Christ. We need to be filled with the Spirit. We need to surrender all to God—our bodies, possessions, time, etc. We need to die to ourselves. If God chooses to use us as martyrs who pay the ultimate price for His glory, that must be okay with us. Only with this frame of mind will we be able to stand in a day of persecution. If we are afraid of the possibility of suffering for Christ, we need to pray that God gives us boldness and strength.

Christians have been persecuted throughout history. In the First Primitive Persecution, under Nero, “He had some sewed up in the skins of wild beasts, and then worried by dogs till they expired; and others dressed in shirts made stiff with wax, fixed to axle-trees, and set on fire in his garden.” *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, pg. 13. These martyrs got through their suffering by their strong faith in God, their complete filling of the Spirit, and their total surrender of all to Christ.

The prospect of martyrdom will separate those who are in the church for what they can get out of it from those who are coming for God. It will divide those who hold their lives above all else, and those who hold Christ above all. Those who are full of themselves will leave while those who are full of the Spirit will stay.

¹ *Satan His Motives and Methods*, by Lewis Sperry Chafer, pg. 124

Acts 6-7 Questions Section 1: Read Acts 6:1-7

Organizations have snags, things that don't work. The Apostles are true to their calling. They refuse to give up their ministry of prayer and proclaiming the Word, to do menial work. They delegate the job to Spirit-filled wise leaders chosen by the people they are to serve—the neglected Hellenistic Jews who have entered the church.

1. What was the solution to the problem of unequal distribution of goods?
2. What was the ministry of the Apostles? What kind of people were to be chosen to work in the church?

Section 2: Read Acts 6:8-15

Stephen is chosen. He was filled with the Spirit and God worked through him to do many signs and wonders. Of course, where the Kingdom shines, the darkness tries to quench it. Just like Jesus he is brought up on false charges and dragged before the same Jewish leaders. He is accused of speaking against Moses (the Law) and God.

1. How was God's kingdom shown in Stephen? How could he have out debated the Jewish people? How can we become strong enough to be able to debate our faith against others? What does the Scripture mean when it says that Stephen's face looked like an angel's? Where else have we seen this?

Section 3: Read Acts 7:1-53

Stephen brilliantly explains that God had always worked this way. God revealed Himself and made promises. But there were always some of the Jews who stood against God. They stood against Joseph. They turned on Moses, who brought them the Words of God and prophesied that another like him was coming. Their

idolatry sent them to Babylon. They even killed the prophets who spoke of the Messiah. Stephen declares that these Jews who oppose the work of God in Christ and by His Spirit are following those who stood against God throughout history.

1. What are the two main responses to God that Stephen describes in his speech? How do you think Stephen had the boldness to speak this way in front of the Jewish leaders? How could we get this kind of boldness?

Section 4: Read Acts 7:54-60

Well, the Jews simply lose it. They go ballistic and take Stephen out and stone him to death. But notice Stephen's reaction. He does not plead for his life. He doesn't recant. He is so full of God his face glows like an angel's—like Moses' when he was with God. He sees right into heaven and sees Jesus standing next to the Father. Some believe Jesus was honoring and welcoming the first martyr of the faith. In the end, just like Jesus, Stephen forgives his murderers. Earlier we saw the church laying their money at the Apostle's feet to feed the poor. Here we see the murderers laying their coats before their leader—Saul, who will be Paul the Apostle.

1. How is it that Stephen could go through this experience with such grace and goodness?
2. Have you ever considered that you might be rejected for your faith? You might be attacked or persecuted. You might even die. What can you do now, daily, to prepare for the day when you might be asked to make this ultimate sacrifice?