

KINGDOM SIGN AND OUTPOST

ACTS 6, 7



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T. M. AND SUSIE MOORE

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6, 7
Copyright 2022 T. M. and Susie Moore
The Fellowship of Ailbe
www.ailbe.org

Except as indicated, all Scripture are taken from the *New King James Version*. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. All quotations from the early Church Fathers are from *Acts: Ancient Christian Commentary Series, New Testament V*, Francis Martin, ed., General Editor Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006). All quotations from the Reformation Church Fathers are from *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Acts, New Testament VI*, Esther Chung-Kim and Todd R. Hains, eds., Timothy George, General Editor (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014). All quotes from John Calvin are from *Commentaries on Acts*, Rev. John Pringle, tr. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translational Society). All quotations from Matthew Henry are from *Matthew Henry Concise Commentary*, E-text version Copyright 1996, 2002 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. All Rights Reserved. All quotes from Earl Radmacher are from *The NKJV Study Bible*, copyright ©1997, 2007 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All psalms for singing are from *The Ailbe Psalter* (Williston: Waxed Tablet Publications, 2006), available by [clicking here](#).

Introduction to Acts 6 and 7

Building His Church describes the Lord's agenda for pursuing His ongoing work of establishing and advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The Church, we have seen, is a *sign* the Kingdom has come. It embodies the new reality of Kingdom presence, promises, and power.

In Acts 6 we continue to see the power for love which the Spirit engenders within the believing community. So powerful and unprecedented is this love, that many even of the harshest opponents of the Gospel soon give in to its allure.

But the Church is not simply a sign of the Kingdom; it is the Kingdom outpost as well. From the Church the Kingdom breaks out, spreads, and advances into all of life, culture, society, and the world. And this work goes forward, at times, even against the most determined opposition.

In Acts 6 and 7 we will see how the Church as sign and outpost of the Kingdom fulfills its mission under the building and guiding direction of the Lord.

We're pleased to provide *Scriptorium* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity with the Lord.

If you find these studies, or any of our other resources helpful, we hope you will consider making a contribution to help support our work. You can do so by using the donate button at the website or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

1 Keeping Focused

Pray Psalm 133.1.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!

Sing Psalm 133.1, 3.

(Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara: [*Children of the Heavenly Father*](#))

O behold, how sweet, how pleasant, when the brethren dwell together;
all in unity abiding find God's blessing there presiding.

Read Acts 6.1-4.

Preparation

1. What was – or was not – happening in the church in Jerusalem?
2. How did “the twelve” respond?

Meditation

As we have seen, those first Christians were an extraordinary group of men and women – eager to learn, quick to share, bold, devout, prayerful. They stood out from their peers, and enjoyed the admiration of all the people (2.47).

But these first Christians were still people, and therefore still capable of messing things up. I don't see any indication of sin in this situation involving the widows; a “complaint” need not be construed as implying intentional wrongdoing or even anger, resentment, or the like. The widows who were being overlooked were simply victims of poor management or a distribution system that needed updating in light of the growing ranks of disciples. It's certainly understandable how this could have come about, given the rapid growth of the believing community. There was a problem, and it needed to be fixed. The peace of the community was disrupted, and it needed to be restored (Eph. 4.3).

To their credit, the people knew to come to the apostles rather than allow the situation to fester and create bad feelings. And the apostles, to *their* credit, understood that not every problem was *their* problem. The shepherds of the church are appointed for the oversight of the souls of the people (Heb. 13.17). The “tools of the trade” for this high calling are prayer, the Word of God, and the personal example of the minister (cf. 1 Pet. 5.1-3). “Serving tables” would have given the apostles the opportunity to employ the last of these tools, but doing so in this situation, in their estimation, would have compromised the other two. They rightly recommended an alternative course of action. They laid out the qualifications this work would require, and left it to the people to choose those who would serve them.

The purpose of leaders is to lead, and the effectiveness of leaders is tried whenever crises or challenges arise. This is now the third challenge the apostles have had to deal with since the church in Jerusalem began to get organized in Acts 2. In each case, the Spirit empowered them with courage and wisdom to persevere in the ongoing work of Jesus Christ. The key is to keep focused on that work and not allow anything to sidetrack the progress of the Kingdom.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

It seems the issues that are arising in the early church are precedent-setters for us today.

From Ananias and Sapphira we learned that each person is responsible before God for their own behavior. He lied. She lied. They both died.

From this situation with the Hellenists we learn that those with the complaint, need to step up and take care of the problem themselves. They were the ones who saw that there was a problem with the widows of their group being overlooked in the daily distribution. They were the ones who brought it to the disciple's attention.

Today, we might blame the government, or expect some new law to be enacted to take care of the equity issue. Or some already overworked member of the church would be tapped to take care of the trouble.

But wisely, then, they chose people from the Hellenist group to fulfill the needs of their own observation and complaint. And wisely, they suggested the qualifications that these problem-solvers should have:

1. A good reputation.
2. A soul full of the Holy Spirit.
3. A life full of wisdom.

This new position took on a very reputable demeanor by choosing men of great character. Every work within the church is an honorable and important work. These men were the first deacons. And they established the tradition honorably and well.

Deacons must be “reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless” (1 Tim. 3.8-10).

The first church needed to keep focused. Because centuries of Christians were following in their wake. “For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3.13).

Each one of us, who belong to Christ, has a job to do in our own Personal Mission Field. We learn from this situation that if we see a problem, we should try and implement a solution.

But most importantly, we should have a good reputation, and be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2.10).

For reflection

1. What do we learn from this situation about dealing with issues that arise in the local church?
2. Why was it necessary that the men chosen to meet this need have the qualities outlined by the apostles?
3. Why do we need to nurture such qualities? What needs do you expect to meet today?

The issue here was not blame, but rather what could be done to remedy the apparent injustice. The apostles knew that the problem of supporting the needy required attention. Though the apostles were sensitive enough to recognize the problem, they were also careful to recognize the priorities that are placed on church leaders by God. They could not leave what God had called them to do—declaring and teaching the word of God and establishing the church in prayer. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Acts 6.2

Pray Psalm 133.2, 3.

Pray that God will unite His churches in love, and that the unity of churches may strengthen our witness, according to the promise of Jesus in John 17.21.

Sing Psalm 133.2, 3.

(Tryggare Kan Ingen Vara: [*Children of the Heavenly Father*](#))

Like the precious oil of blessing flowing down on Aaron's vestment,
God's anointing rests forever where His people dwell together.

Like the dew of Hermon's fountain falling down on Zion's mountain,
so the blessing of the Savior dwells where unity finds favor.

2 Living Proof

Pray Psalm 147.1-3.

Praise the LORD!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
For it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful.
The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
He gathers together the outcasts of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
And binds up their wounds.

Sing Psalm 147.1-3.

(St. Anne: *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*)
Praise God, for it is good to sing loud praises to the Lord!
With joy our songs of praise we bring to God and to His Word.

The Lord builds up His Church and He His people gathers in.
The broken hearts He tenderly repairs and heals their sin.

Read Acts 6.1-7; meditate on verses 5-7.

Preparation

1. Who were chosen for this work? How were they commissioned to it?
2. What happened after this?

Meditation

Here is evidence of increasing maturity within the body of Christ as a whole, the result of faithful and diligent equipping by the apostles (Eph. 4.11-16). The apostles approved the selection the people had made, and “ordained” the men to the task. And so the job was done, the system repaired, and peace restored. We note the results: The Word of God continued to increase.

But the truly amazing result of this situation is in the last part of verse 7: “a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” Oh, the *convincing* power of the love of Christ! The world had seen the unity of these disciples and their love for one another, and even the most hard-core opponents of the faith were convinced (Jn. 13.35; 17.21), just as Jesus had predicted. Remember, these were the same priests who killed Jesus and persecuted the apostles. They’d heard the message and not only denied it, but moved to stifle and silence it. And now here they are, believing the Gospel, forfeiting their privileged status in Jerusalem to unite themselves with the body of Christ and begin a new start in life. No wonder Jesus emphasized “you will *be* My witnesses,” and not merely, “you will *go* witnessing.” The *being* is as important as the *doing*. Here we see why.

Jesus was right about the power of visible unity to convince even the enemies of the Gospel of its truth. The loving, efficient, participative way this problem was solved, and a crisis averted, made it plain to all who were looking on from without that something truly new and wondrous was at work here. This is the ongoing work of Christ – to sign the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom to the world, and to serve as an outpost for its advance.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

The people were pleased about how the disciples had decided to resolve the problem of the Hellenist widows.

They were also pleased that the disciples would give themselves “continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6.4).

Remember when a substitute teacher showed up at your classroom? The overall joy was that the norm would not be followed and something new would take its place. A trivial conversation perhaps? Or a movie shown? Anything but the usual hard work was an exciting prospect.

The early church however did not succumb to that laziness of mind or that search for something new, distracting, or fun. No. They were actually pleased that the disciples would give themselves to the serious prayer and study needed to help them be proper overseers of the quickly growing Body of Christ.

They took seriously the importance of the word:

“Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.”

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119.11, 105).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3.16).

“For the word of God *is* living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4.12).

And they took seriously the absolute necessity of prayer:

“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” (Rom. 12.10-13).

“Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (Jms. 5.16).

Through giving themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word the result would be faithful workman. Obedience to the Word grows the fellowship of believers. Faithful workmen produce faithful followers of Christ. “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2. 15 KJV).

“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly...” (Acts 6.7).

“Living Proof!” Obedience to God’s word. Always. And in everything.

For reflection

1. Are you satisfied with the state of the Word and prayer in your own walk with the Lord? Explain.
2. Why do you suppose people are not flocking to churches in our day? Are we missing something which the church in Acts had?
3. What will you do today to show “living proof” that the Kingdom of God has come?

What Jesus Christ had done in the lives of these people was spreading throughout the region. Men and women became disciples who lived in submission to Christ’s lordship. They were not ashamed of their faith, but with great boldness they went out to bear witness to the truth of the gospel that had changed their lives. This is what Jesus promised would happen. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Acts 6.7

Pray Psalm 147.12-20.

Praise God for the power of His Word and of the Gospel. Pray that He will make that power known in and through you today as you work your Personal Mission Field.

Sing Psalm 147.12-20.

(St. Anne: Our God, Our Help in Ages Past)

O praise your God, Jerusalem, O Zion, praise the Lord!
He strengthens those who trust in Him with blessings from His Word.

Around us He has spread His peace; our borders are secure.
His bounty daily shall increase; His grace to us is sure!

His Word to earth runs to and fro to carry out His will;
He brings the rain, He sends the snow, and none can keep Him still.

His Word He to His Church bestows – His promises and Law.
No other nation God thus knows: Praise Him with songs of awe!

3 Overpowering

Pray Psalm 46.1-3.

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.
Selah

Sing Psalm 46.1-3.

(St. Chrysostom: [*We Have Not Known Thee As We Ought*](#))

God is our refuge and our strength; He is our help in times of need.
Thus though the earth beneath us should change, the sea consume the mountain range;
waters may roar with raging speed; yet God will rescue us at length.

Read Acts 6.1-15; meditate on verses 8-15.

Preparation

1. How is Stephen described in these verses?
2. With what was he charged by his opponents?

Meditation

Stephen, “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 5), was also “full of faith and power” (cf. Acts 1.8). While the wonders and signs Stephen performed were miraculous in nature, it’s not necessary to think of signs and wonders exclusively in this way. Any extraordinary act of love or kindness would “sign” something significant and cause people to “wonder.”

The blinding power of sin is again in evidence here. Why else would anyone want to stop someone doing so much good, or refuse to hear the message which, Stephen would have explained, was the source of such goodness?

We note the trumped-up charges as being the same as hurled against Jesus (vv. 11, 13, 14) – it worked then, so hey, why not here too? We note also that opposition to Stephen arose from Jews from various places (v. 9). Luke mentions this to foreshadow the rest of his story: Opposition will arise wherever the Gospel goes. The great victory here in Jerusalem, followed by opposition and persecution, is typical of what the Gospel will meet all over the Empire, and down through the ages of Church history.

[Rembrandt portrays Stephen’s face](#) as peaceable, calm, and shining – “the face of an angel” (v. 15). With all due respect to the master, I think he might have missed it. Whenever angels appear in Scripture the response of those who see them isn’t, “Oh, how sweet, how cute.” Rather, they’re terrified. Stephen’s wisdom, grace, eloquence, personal piety, and power of witness struck fear in the hearts of those who opposed him.

Christians are called to *be* witnesses for the Lord. They will also *do the work of evangelism* as part of that witness. Thus they *sign* the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit by their love for God, one another, and their neighbors; and they serve as an *outpost* for the progress of the Kingdom by their spoken witness for the Lord. Stephen is an excellent example of how God can use each of us in our Personal Mission Fields to

show and advance His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17, 18).

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

As the church continues to grow, they all continue to learn, and their faith is solidified. How? And why? Because God's words, Jesus' words, are all coming true. As always.

God said to Samuel, "...they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Sam. 8.7). Ditto for the religious leaders of the day.

Jesus told His disciples: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5.12, 13). True. Then and now. "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16.33). And true. Now and then.

Our job, as the followers of Jesus Christ in this generation, is to be obedient. To trust in God. To be "full of faith, grace, and power" (Acts 6.8); and like Stephen, to take upon ourselves whatever we are called to do, for God's honor and glory.

The opposition now, as then, will not be able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which we speak (Acts 6.10).

As we stand against our opposition may we have the same face of an Angel that Stephen had. The same determined face of the Angel that stood before the false prophet Balaam and that caused his donkey to cower in fear. "Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face" (Num. 22.31). Our courageous and determined faces, and armed with the sword of the Spirit (Ps. 149.5, 6; Eph. 6.17).

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1.7).

Overpowering. Perhaps persecuted. Always overcoming. Blessed. That is us.

For reflection

1. Do you know of places where Christians are being persecuted? Do you pray for those believers?
2. Again, Stephen's story shows us the importance of standing firm on the Word of God. How do you prepare to stand firm each day?
3. How can believers encourage one another to be more consistent in their witness for the Lord?

Stephen was full of wisdom (v. 3), full of the Holy Spirit (v. 5), and full of faith and power. He had the gifts, the boldness, and the brilliance to be a powerful witness; yet even his witness would be rejected by the religious leaders. Hearts are opened only by God, not by our gifts, boldness, or brilliance. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Acts 6.8

Pray Psalm 46.4-11.

Seek the Lord's guidance and protection for the day ahead. Pray for those believers who are persecuted for their faith, that they may find true refuge and strength in the Lord. Praise and exalt the Lord, and commit yourself afresh to Him for this day.

Sing Psalm 46.4-11.

(St Chrysostom: *We Have Not Known Thee As We Ought*)

God's everlasting, joyous grace gladdens the city where He dwells.

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6 and 7

Safely in Him, we will not be moved; when morning dawns, His love will be proved.
Fears and distresses Jesus dispels for His beloved, chosen race.

Kingdoms arise and rage and roar, threat'ning the earth with sore distress;
nations may fall, earth melt away, His Word is yet our hope and stay.
God is among us, ever to bless; He is our stronghold evermore.

Come see the works of God's Right Hand! He breaks the nations of the earth,
shatters their foolish weapons and pride, sets all their sinful strength aside;
them He will show His infinite worth as they before His judgment stand.

Rest in the Lord and be at peace, all who are mired in sore travail:
Lift up our God, praise Jesus our Lord; proclaim to all the earth His Word!
God is our stronghold, never to fail: thus may our hope and joy increase.

4 From the Top...

Pray Psalm 149.1, 2.

Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,

And His praise in the assembly of saints.

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.

Sing Psalm 149.1, 2.

(Toulon: [*I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art*](#))

Sing to the Lord a glorious song and new!

Praise Him you people, to Whom praise is due!

Let us rejoice, let us be glad in Him

Who has created us and cleansed our sin.

Read Acts 7.1-16.

Preparation

1. Where did Stephen begin his defense?

2. Where are God's people at the end of this part of Stephen's defense?

Meditation

Stephen's defense before the high priest deserves more space than we can give it here. I want to point out just the most important aspects. There is plenty for us to learn about being witnesses for the Lord in this brief and fatal sermon.

We note that, in defending himself Stephen turns to Scripture. Since his message was Scriptural, his defense should not have been of anything *he* was doing, but of the validity of his message and his actions in the light of that message. Note the genius of this opening statement: He linked himself to his accusers, and his accusers and himself to the same source – God's promise to Abraham (v. 2). Then he made God's initiating grace and Abraham's obedience to God's Word the keystone for his message. He will ultimately turn the tables on his accusers, assuming his own obedience of this covenantal call and charging them with failing to do as Abraham did.

Verses 1-16 cover, essentially, the entire book of Genesis, demonstrating the grace and faithfulness of God and the obedience of the patriarchs to His Word. Stephen is building a Biblical case for his actions and message because he wants to make sure his accusers accept or reject that message, and not just him.

In his book, *Playing God*, Andy Crouch explains that we miss something in presenting the Gospel if we don't begin at the beginning, if we don't "take it from the top." The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of seeking and advancing His Kingdom are not just New Testament concerns. They are rooted in the very beginnings of divine revelation and the covenant of God. Stephen's oration challenges us to make sure we are living and proclaiming the *whole* Gospel, as rooted in *all of Scripture*, and not just some version of "[near Christianity](#)."

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

How often have you been speaking to someone, and you realize you have lost their attention?

Or perhaps you were imparting some bit of important wisdom or discipline to your child and their adorable face becomes hostile?

Maybe you have been speaking to an audience and you notice the group begins to fidget? Or people begin to leave? Or their somewhat adorable faces begin to show anger?

It is hard to keep on track.
It is hard to stay focused.

It is hard to stay cool and courageous.

Stephen is speaking purely and potently to a crowd of very hostile listeners. Their hatred is palpable, and their attention span is waning. They are ready for action. Against their speaker. Against the truth-teller.

Yet Stephen. Through the power of the Holy Spirit exudes peace and presence of mind.

“You will keep *him* in perfect peace, *whose* mind is stayed *on You*, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in YAH, the LORD, *is* everlasting strength” (Is. 26.3, 4).

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (Jn. 14.27).

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Rom. 5.1)

“For He Himself is our peace...” (Eph. 2.14).

“...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4.7). That is what kept Stephen on track.

Stephen had the peace of God that only comes through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. He may have lost his audience, but he kept his confidence, his competence, his cool, and his self-control. May we have that same trust and obedience.

May God give us the same peace and courage to expound upon the truths of Scripture in the face of dire opposition. From the top, through to the end.

For reflection

1. If you could “hang” your Gospel presentation on five passages of Scripture, what would they be?
2. Why did Stephen start his defense with Abraham? Who was his audience? How would doing this have gotten their attention?
3. How can you maintain the peace of the Lord as you begin to share Jesus with someone?

Then Stephen answers quite seriously and learnedly, retracing their history from the time of Abraham until the recent times of this nation. Out of this long narrative, the main concern or the scope is that it is neither blasphemy nor sedition to teach against ceremonial forms of worship and to preach the [ultimate] purpose of this system: the Messiah. Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560), Postil for the Feast of Stephen 3.

Pray Psalm 149.3-9.

(Toulon: [*I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art*](#))

Praise Him with dance, with tambourine and lyre!

To be so praised is God’s one great desire.

Lord, beautify Your holy ones with grace;

show us the mercy of Your saving face.

Sing to the Lord, exult with great delight!

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6 and 7

Sing on your beds with joy to God by night!
Sing praise and take His Word into your hand;
publish His grace and wrath in every land!

5 ...and Everything Else, Too

Pray Psalm 105.1-6.

Oh, give thanks to the LORD!
Call upon His name;
Make known His deeds among the peoples!
Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him;
Talk of all His wondrous works!
Glory in His holy name;
Let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the LORD!
Seek the LORD and His strength;
Seek His face evermore!
Remember His marvelous works which He has done,
His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth,
O seed of Abraham His servant,
You children of Jacob, His chosen ones!

Sing Psalm 105.1-5.

(Warrington: [*Give to Our God Immortal Praise*](#))

Give thanks unto the Lord Most High; call on His Name, before Him cry!
Make known His deeds in every land; sing praise for all the works of His hand.

Glory in God, rejoice in heart, all you who seek His holy part.
Him and His strength and Presence seek; His works proclaim, His judgments speak.

Read Acts 7.1-50; meditate on verses 17-50.

Preparation

1. How did Stephen connect Moses to Abraham?
2. What did Stephen say about Israel in the wilderness?

Meditation

Recall that Stephen was on trial here because he supposedly spoke against “this holy place and the law” (6.13). Having started at the top, rooting his defense in God’s covenant with the patriarchs, Stephen continued to unfold that theme through Moses, David, and the prophets. He was only emphasizing things every one of his hearers would have known and affirmed, including the important point that the rebellious people of those days failed to see what God was doing and to do what He required of them (vv. 17-43).

Here, like Emily Dickinson, Stephen was “telling it slant” and building a case against his accusers. As they nodded along in assent to everything he was saying, they set themselves up for his “Thou art the man!”

The *Tabernacle*, which was the dwelling place of God and familiar and beloved by every Jew in its day, was *replaced* by the *Temple*, which was authorized by God through David and constructed by Solomon (vv. 44-48). But if we think God dwells in a Temple made by men (v. 48), thus making that building something so sacred no one would ever dare to think of it being *replaced*, then, Stephen implied, we have failed to understand the same Word of God we’ve been affirming up to this point (vv. 48-50).

Stephen was leading his accusers to *affirm* God’s grace and faithfulness, and the *requirement of obedience* to His calling and commands; to *recall* the developing nature of God’s covenant with His people, that changes came

at significant points in the covenant; and to *remember* that *obedience* to *God's Word*, not veneration of temples or traditions, is what really matters. They listened in agreement as he prepared to hoist them on their own petard. He would show that they were not keepers of the covenant they so revered; they had not listened to Moses who promised a great Prophet to come; and they had misconstrued the role of the temple in the divine economy. They were the guilty ones, not he.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Stephen brought some very important issues to the fore about working our Personal Mission Field.

He shared a bit of Moses' heart with us: "For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand" (Acts 7.25).

At this point in his life, Moses appears to have been afflicted with the same problem that so many today are afflicted with: The Billy Graham Syndrome. Yes. It is a thing. Let me give you the symptoms: You think that what you are doing for the Lord is not important unless there are huge numbers of people involved. And you think that only professional Christians are the ones who are sent to live and share the Gospel. Happily, fevers and headaches are not attenuating symptoms.

Here is how Moses improved; and we can too. The symptoms lessen, and we can get on with our lives. We realize that we are called to live and do the work and Word of God. Faithfully. Right where we are. The people God has called us to are important. And we see and understand that our work is important. The sphere is where we live. We do not need to go to the furthest jungle or desert to do this. We do it right where we are.

For forty years Moses obeyed God. He was a good son-in-law. He was a good husband and father. He worked hard. He was faithful to all God gave him to do. And then God moved him on from where he was to do a little more. "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matt. 25.21). "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much..." (Lk. 16.10).

And yes, then Moses was called to deliver his people. But here, in Stephen's sermon, he is remembered for speaking these prophetic words about Jesus: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear" (Acts 7.37).

And we can give the same word of Good News to all the people in our Personal Mission Field. We can love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We can serve God only. We can be faithful bearers of the name Christian. We can keep the Sabbath Day holy. We can honor our father and mother. We can refuse to kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet. (Ex. 20.1-17) We are filled with the Holy Spirit. We can do this!

When Moses was looking to be used in the wrong way (Acts 7.25) he was not successful. But when he was faithful and obedient to his calling, where he was, and with whom he was, God used him mightily.

Please know how important your Personal Mission Field is; because without you, it won't be worked. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2.10).

For Reflection

1. What is your Personal Mission Field? What is God sending you there to do?
2. What can we learn from Stephen's defense about how to share the Gospel with lost people?
3. What is for you the most important lesson from Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin?

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6 and 7

Stephen pointed out that Moses, the very one the Jewish leaders accused him of speaking against (6:11), was rejected by the leaders' forefathers as God's appointed leader and redeemer—just as the leaders were rejecting Jesus. It was this same Moses who spoke of the coming of Jesus in Deut. 18. Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Acts 7.35-40

Pray Psalm 105.6-11, 45.

Praise God for His promises, His faithfulness, and His power to work in and through you for His glory. Commit this day to walking in His Word, and seek His Presence and power to make you His faithful witness today.

Sing Psalm 105.6-11, 45.

(Warrington: *Give to Our God Immortal Praise*)

You holy children of Abraham, you chosen ones of Jacob, stand!

He is our Lord, of wondrous worth; His judgments are in all the earth.

He will His covenant faithfully guard – His oath, the promise of His Word.

That which He to our fathers swore, He will perform forevermore!

So let us all in our Savior confide, and in His holy Law abide.

Let us observe His glorious Word, and praise our sovereign, faithful Lord!

6 An End and a Beginning

Pray Psalm 62.1, 2.

Truly my soul silently *waits* for God;
From Him *comes* my salvation.
He only *is* my rock and my salvation;
He is my defense;
I shall not be greatly moved.

Sing Psalm 62.1, 2.

(Germany: *Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness*)

My soul in silence waits, O Lord – safely I stand within Your Word!
You are my Rock, my Stronghold true, and my Salvation, Lord, are You!

Read Acts 7.1-60; meditate on verses 51-60.

Preparation

1. What did Stephen do?
2. How did the religious leaders react? How did the Lord react?

Meditation

Stephen turned the table over on their toes, using perfectly Biblical language, to indict his accusers of being precisely what they were hoping to convict him of being, enemies of God and His people (vv. 51-53). He insisted that *they* were the stiff-necked, not him. *They* were the ones whose hearts and ears were shut to God. *They* were resisting the Spirit, just like their fathers did, who persecuted and killed the prophets. And in case they'd forgotten, they "betrayed and murdered" the Righteous One, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Stephen may well have understood where all this would lead. These same men had warned the apostles, then threatened them, then beat them. And they had already shown, in the case of Jesus, that they were not unwilling to take the most drastic step, if need be. Stephen understood the consequences of his bold witness, and sailed right into the teeth of them, unafraid.

Blind rage and passion got the best of these men, and they dragged Stephen beyond the walls of the city and stoned him to death (vv. 54-58). [Rembrandt's *The Stoning of Stephen*](#) captures the violence of this scene. Stephen was not afraid to die for Christ. He seemed to be surprised, not at seeing Jesus at the right hand of God – I'm convinced he was a regular visitor to that venue (Col. 3.1-3; 2 Cor. 4.6). Otherwise, how could he have recognized what he was seeing? He was surprised, not to see Jesus, but to see Jesus *standing* (vv. 59, 60).

Ever true to His own Law, Jesus stood in the presence of a true elder of Israel (Lev. 19.32) to welcome him home and to receive him into glory. Stephen demonstrated his worthiness – which is really Christ's worthiness – right to end, emulating his Savior and Lord, even in his death. Stephen's end would be Saul of Tarsus' beginning, for he would never forget the courage of this witness for Christ.

A new phase in the ongoing work of Christ is about to unfold. Stephen's murder will embolden the authorities in Jerusalem, as we shall see. But it will embolden the believers more, who neither flinch nor cower before the reality of what they'd already taught themselves to expect.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Stephen's beautiful and precise sermon (Acts 7.2-50). Then his accurate accusation (Acts 7.51-53). Then his

beautiful observation of Jesus standing to welcome him home (Acts 7.55, 56).

This is an emotionally charged scene fraught with vindication, value, and victory!

Our hearts should swell with godly pride at this brother's courage and graciousness. He not only pointed a finger at their horrendous sin; but he asked God to forgive their personal cruelty to him (Acts 7.60). It just does not get any better than that.

Oh, friends, the bar has been set very high for us! This humble man, Stephen, lived the gold standard for all believers to follow.

Stephen showed us the truth of God's promise:

"But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

"But when they arrest *you* and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."

"Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (Matt. 10.19, 20; Mk. 13.11; Lk. 12.11, 12).

And then Stephen showed us how to rejoice and forgive in the face of persecution:

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5.11, 12).

"And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4.32).

"Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another..." (Col. 3.12, 13).

Stephen is our heritage, our brother in Christ. We have a calling, like his, to share the truth of Christ with those in our own Personal Mission Field. Just like he did. If it doesn't go well, we have his example to follow, and Jesus' words of encouragement that we are not in this battle alone. We are filled with His Spirit.

"By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 Jn. 4.13).

For reflection

1. What did Stephen do to enrage the Sanhedrin? Is there really a place for this in bearing witness to Jesus? Explain.
2. Stephen saw Jesus and was encouraged. What should we learn from this (Col. 3.1-3)?
3. Stephen, it seems, was ready for the worst from his testimony. How should you prepare for the fact that some folks might not appreciate your witness for the Lord?

Nothing is so comfortable to dying saints, or so encouraging to suffering saints, as to see Jesus at the right hand of God: blessed be God, by faith we may see him there. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Acts 7.54-60*

Pray Psalm 62.3-12.

Remember that you are continuously engaged in a spiritual warfare, and spiritual foes want nothing more than to keep you from knowing God's salvation and living for His glory. Commit your day to Him, and call on Him to guard and strengthen you against all opposition, and to fill you with His power.

Sing Psalm 62.3-12.

(Germany: Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness)

How long will foes give me offense, striking me like a tottering fence?
They counsel to destroy with lies; they bless, but all the while despise.

My soul in silence waits, O Lord, hoping in You, and in Your Word.
You are my Rock, my Stronghold true, and my Salvation, Lord, are You!

On You my hope and glory rest, Rock of my strength, and Refuge best!
Trust always in our God, the Lord; take refuge only in His Word.

Trust not in men of low degree; lighter are they than breath shall be.
Do not rely on strength or gold; trust in the Lord, Who rules from old.

Once God has spoken, twice I have heard: power belongs alone to the Lord!
And lovingkindness, Lord, is Yours; You recompense us for our works.

7 Seed of the Church

Pray Psalm 61.1, 2.

Hear my cry, O God;
Attend to my prayer.
From the end of the earth I will cry to You,
When my heart is overwhelmed;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Sing Psalm 61.1, 2.

(Quebec: [*Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts*](#))

Lord, hear my cry, heed my complaint! Hear, for my distant heart is faint.
When from the end of earth I sigh, set me upon that Rock on high.

Read again Acts 6 and 7; meditate on Acts 7.57-60.

Preparation

1. How many ways did Stephen bear witness to his love for Jesus?
2. How did the Lord Jesus respond to his witness?

Meditation

Early in the third century AD, an African lawyer named Tertullian wrote to the Roman emperor an appeal to cease persecuting Christians and instead realize the great boon they were to his realm. He explained that the effort to stop the spread of Christianity by harassing, jailing, and even killing Christians was doomed to fail anyway, because, as he explained, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

The blood of Stephen that stained the guilty earth of Jerusalem, contained the seeds for a rapid and far-flung expansion of the faith into Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth, precisely as Jesus had promised (Acts 1.8). That expansive stage of the ongoing work of Christ will take up the next phase of our study of the book of Acts.

Not to be missed, as this first stage concludes, is the passing reference to Saul of Tarsus (v. 58). Saul – who became the apostle Paul – carried the memory of Stephen’s courage and convictions, and of his own guilty participation in his death, to the end of his life (cf. Acts 22.20). My sense is that Saul’s conversion to Christianity began here, though only later would he profess faith in Jesus, and later still before his ministry began.

The word “martyr” derives from a Greek word which we translate as “witness”. Jesus has appointed all His followers as His witnesses, and that means we must all be prepared for whatever sacrifices, loss, trial, or difficulty that calling might entail. But who knows how many Sauls of Tarsus will be affected by our patient endurance and faithful witness for the Lord? Stephen did not live to see the fruit of his witness in the life of him who would become the apostle Paul. But it didn’t matter. He saw that which was by far more beautiful and more enduring (vv. 54, 55), and which is the eternal reward that awaits all who sow the seeds of faith by their lives of self-denying love.

We are His witnesses. Let us follow in Stephen’s footsteps, whatever that may require.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Stephen and his brothers and sisters in Christ presented a united front. They were together in all their

thoughts and actions.

“These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication...” (Acts 1.14).

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common...” (Acts 2.44).

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul...” (Acts 4.32).

The opposition couldn’t agree about why they hated Stephen, but they were united in their murderous rage against him. “Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord...” (Acts 7.57).

Our job as Christians is to be united in Christ’s love. Because, sure enough, the opposition is united in their hatred toward us.

Paul, who was witnessed to by Stephen, later in his life wrote these words: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4.1-3).

And Jesus prayed to His Father, asking Him to bless His disciples then, and those of us who would follow: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have love Me” (Jn. 17.20-23).

The enemies’ accord leads to death; our accord leads to life. And discord among believers annuls our faith and our witness.

But being united in Christ, with one accord, loudly proclaims to the world, united against us, that God sent Jesus into the world so that we, and they, will not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn. 3.16). If we believe in Him.

United we honor the Lord Jesus Christ, and all our martyred brothers and sisters, seeds of the Church, who have gone before us.

For Reflection

1. What’s the primary lesson from Stephen’s witness for you?
2. Why is it so important that Christians labor to maintain one accord in our mission?
3. What “seeds of the Church” will you sow this week?

We see how Stephen leaneth not unto the judgment of the flesh, but rather assuring himself, even in very destruction, that he shall be saved, he suffereth death with a quiet mind. For undoubtedly he was assured of this, that our life is hid with Christ in God, (Colossians 3:3). John Calvin (1509-1564), Commentary on Acts 7.59

Pray Psalm 61.3-8.

Thank God for His renewing and sustaining grace. Renew your commitment to follow, obey, and serve Him, come what may. Offer the day ahead to Him, and yourself as a living sacrifice to praise Him in all you do.

Sing Psalm 61.3-8.

(Quebec: [Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts](#))

You are a Refuge, Lord, for me, towering o’er my enemy!

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6 and 7

Let me find shelter 'neath Your wings, dwell in Your tent eternally.

Lord, You have heard what I have vowed; You have on me Your grace bestowed.
You will prolong my years, my life, keep me alive 'mid trial and strife.

I will with You e'ermore abide; let lovingkindness take my side.
Let truth preserve me all my days; I will forever sing Your praise!

Kingdom Sign and Outpost: Acts 6 and 7

For reflection or discussion

1. How does the church's role of *signing* the Kingdom and being a Kingdom *outpost* relate to one another?
2. What is a church doing which is serving as a Kingdom *sign* and *outpost* in its community?
3. Why is it important that we keep the Word of God central to our witness for the Lord?
4. How can Christians help one another to be bolder and more consistent in their witness?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 6 and 7?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

Thank you.