

# EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Name:

PARTICIPANTS GUIDE PART 2 - FALL 2024



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## LETTER FROM KURT

*The book of Acts, in my opinion, is the most indispensable book of the New Testament. We have four Gospel accounts, 13 letters from Paul, and many letters from other writers which are all equally important. But Acts stands alone as a unique book unlike no other in our New Testament. It describes what the early church looks like, and prescribes what all churches should aspire to.*

*Acts is more than just a historical documentary...it is a personal narrative telling the story of God's followers. This narrative includes many scenes, acts (no pun intended), characters, and plot lines which lead us back to God. There is one person who ties everything together and is woven throughout the narrative as the main character with the leading role..and it may not be who you think it is.*

*Luke wrote the book of Acts, but he rarely mentions himself. Peter and John were the pillars of the early church, but they take a back seat in this story. Over half of the narrative follows the life and journey of the Apostle Paul, but he is still not the most important person in the book.*

*The main character in the book of Acts is the person of the Holy Spirit! You see his presence, power, and influence throughout every story and plot twist. Before Jesus left, he promised his followers something better was coming...the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).*

*We learn more about who the Holy Spirit is and how he operates in the book of Acts than any other book in the Bible. In this book, we see the power of the Holy Spirit and how he empowered followers of Jesus to accomplish the will of God (Acts1:8).*

*It is my hope and prayer throughout this LIFE Group season, you not only learn about Jesus and his first followers...but you receive, follow and EMPOWERED by the Holy Spirit!*

*May God bless,*

**Kurt Charlton**



Lead Minister

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

The purpose of this guide is to help you dive deeper into the book of Acts and the works of the Holy Spirit.

### SERMON NOTES:

Bring this workbook to church each Sunday. As you listen to the sermon, make a note when you hear something that surprises you, intrigues you, bothers you, challenges you, or encourages you. Use this as a starting point for your group discussion.

### ACTS OVERVIEW:

Each week, we will provide extra insight into the background of the text as you begin your own study. These notes are meant to help the scriptures come alive for us. They will add a depth of meaning and help us see the continuity of the central themes throughout the book of Acts.

### CONNECT QUESTIONS:

These questions will help you and your group members become more comfortable with talking and sharing with each other. Not only will you learn more about one another, the questions will help to steer the discussion in the direction of the topic.

### DIGGING IN:

These questions are the “meat” of the discussion and will point back to the sermon each week. Feel free to read and answer the questions before your group meets. They will also help you dig deeper into the Scriptures during your group discussions.

### CHANGE QUESTIONS:

Conviction leads people to significant actions. At the end of Jesus’ most famous sermon, he says if you do not put his words into practice, then you are a fool (Matthew 7:24-27). Life transformation is the ultimate goal of a follower of Christ. This happens through personal reflection and a genuine response to what you have heard from God. Feel free to answer the questions out loud when your leader reads them or you can quietly reflect and write a response in your workbook. This is the time to go deep and make it personal!

### WRAP UP:

This section is a summary of that week's study.

### CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER:

Please focus this time on your own personal praises and requests instead of listing all of the bad things that happened to someone you know. We challenge you to get “deep” with one another relationally, which means becoming a little bit vulnerable as you are honest with one-another.

### LEADER LEARNING:

This information may help you in preparing for the material you will be leading and anticipate some of the questions the group may ask. This section will not appear in the student’s workbook.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE BOOK OF ACTS:

### INTRODUCTION

Acts is written by Luke, the physician, who is the only Gentile author of the New Testament. Luke covertly includes himself into the narrative a few times by saying we/us. The Gospel of Luke is episode one; Acts is episode two. The movement of the church in Acts follows the general flow of Jesus’ instructions in Acts 1:8; Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:1a); Judea/Samaria (Acts 8:1b-12:25); Ends of the world (Acts 13-28).

### MAJOR THEMES

#### - HOLY SPIRIT (and his power)

Holy Spirit is mentioned 56 times, which is more per chapter than any other book of the Bible. He is responsible for every major turning point in the narrative. (1:2; 1:8; 2:1-4; 4:28-31; 5:32; 8:15-17; 10:44-46; 11:15; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 19:4-6; 20:22)

#### - PERSECUTION (and its results)

Early Christians suffered intense persecution, but Luke always records the positive attitudes and results. (4:3-4; 4:23-24; 5:40-42; 8:1-4; 11:19-21; 12:1-19; 14:1-7; 14:8-22; 16:25-34; 18:1-8; 21:11)

#### - BAPTISM (and its importance)

Baptism was clearly commanded as a response to faith in Jesus (2:38) and was the common practice for all new believers. (2:37-41; 8:5-13; 8:36-38; 9:10-12; 9:17-19; 10:47-48; 16:13-15; 16:27-34; 18:5-8; 19:1-5; 22:14-17)

#### - THE CHURCH (and its ups/downs)

Luke gives church summary statements like a narrator who wants to inform the readers of what they missed in-between each scene. (2:42-27; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 5:42; 6:7; 9:31; 12: 24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:19-20)

#### - PRAYER (and its effects)

Prayer is intentionally scattered throughout the entire narrative. It is almost like a supporting character beside the Holy Spirit. (1:14; 1:21; 4:31; 6:6; 9:40; 10:1-9; 12:12; 13:1-3; 14:23; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 28:8)

### DESCRIPTIVE VS. PRESCRIPTIVE

Be careful not to read the book of Acts as a prescription for how every single church should operate today. There are times when Luke is merely describing the events as they unfold. It is up to us to interpret and apply what these descriptions mean for us today. One way to do this is to seek the underlying principle that is described, and then turn that into a principle for life.

Should we cast lots or draw names out of a hat when choosing leaders for our church? Should we meet together every single day of the week? Should we sell all of our possessions and give our money to the poor? Should we speak in tongues when we accept the Holy Spirit? These are examples of descriptions not prescriptions for everyone, everywhere.

An example of turning a description into a principle can be found in Acts 2:42. Luke says the first converts devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship. The principle for our lives today is: we us in we should be devoted to God’s Word and to living in community with other Christ followers. Acts 2:46 says they met daily in the temple courts and in homes. The principle for us is we should regularly gather corporately and privately with other believers.



*And they were  
all filled with  
the Holy Spirit  
and spoke the  
word of God boldly.*

*Acts 4:31*

# EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Week 7 - Boldness of the Holy Spirit

# WEEK 7 - BOLDNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 4:5-31 NIV

<sup>5</sup> The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. <sup>7</sup> They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

<sup>8</sup> Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup> If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup> then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup> Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone."

<sup>12</sup> Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

<sup>13</sup> When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup> But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. <sup>15</sup> So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. <sup>16</sup> "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. <sup>17</sup> But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

<sup>18</sup> Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! <sup>20</sup> As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

<sup>21</sup> After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. <sup>22</sup> For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old."

### The Believers Pray

<sup>23</sup> On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. <sup>24</sup> When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. <sup>25</sup> You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>26</sup> The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.'

<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. <sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

<sup>31</sup> After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

## Acts Overview

### SANHEDRIN

The Sanhedrin was a group of 70 religious leaders composed of Pharisees and Sadducees, plus one High Priest. The power and influence of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem cannot be overstated. In first century Judea, there was no such thing as separation of powers or separation of church and state. The Sanhedrin were the legislative, executive, judicial, and religious branches of government all in one body of leadership.

### MIRACLES

Ancient Jews believed in miracles, but they also realized there was power in the dark spiritual world. Whenever an irrefutable miracle took place, the question was rarely "if" it had happened, but rather "who" had made it happen. This is why the Sanhedrin asks Peter and John in 4:7 "By what power or what name did you do this?"

### 4:10-12 SALVATION

The section above regarding miracles sets up Peter's response in 4:10-12. He clearly says this healing was through the name, power, and authority of Jesus Christ "whom they crucified but God raised from the dead". He quotes prophecy from Psalm 118, and then gets to his punch line: Salvation can only be found through Jesus Christ!

### 4:13 BOLD IDIOTS

Luke often records the feelings, reactions, and descriptions of everyone in a scene. The reactions of the Sanhedrin show the tremendous importance of who Peter and John were. They had no formal training, but they were acting as though they were educated rabbis. Obviously, this was because of the infilling power of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 4:8).

The word for "courage" is the same word for "boldness" and is used later in 4:29, 4:31, and the last verse of the narrative in Acts 28:31

The word for "ordinary" is *idiótēs* which is where we get the word idiot, which means amateur, layman, or ungifted person.

## 4:19 SPEAKING WHEN OPPOSED

Peter and John say some very bold and profound words in their responses after being released and given a figurative slap on the wrist. Many would take this as a lucky break and left before the judges changed their mind. Their bold response was undoubtedly infuriating to the religious leaders.

Many commentators make a correlation between Peter and John's response and a similar response of Socrates, over 300 years prior. When Socrates was commanded to stop teaching, he said, "Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you (Plato, *Apology* 29d)." This reference may have resonated with Theophilus, the Greek speaking benefactor to whom Acts is addressed. The Sadducees themselves, had been very influenced by Greek culture.

Others show how this story may have also resonated with a Jewish audience. It is very similar to the response of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3:16-18 (Dean Pinter, *Acts*, pg 115). These words may have also inspired Gamaliel, a Pharisee, to spare the lives of the apostles in Acts 5:39.

## 4:23-31 PRAYER CHANGES ME

The opposition from the religious leaders caused the believers to pray. Their prayer acknowledged the difficulties they faced, as well as the fact that David predicted such difficulties for the followers of God. Amazingly, they did not pray for the threats to be lifted, but they prayed for their own boldness in the moment. They did not pray for God to change their circumstances; they prayed for God to change them to meet the challenge of their circumstances.

## REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS

1. **What product or company do you believe in enough to recommend to someone else?**
2. **When have you spoken well of a product or company only to discover you were wrong?**
3. **Was there a time you tried to hold your tongue, but could not stop yourself from saying something?**

## DIGGING IN

1. **Read Acts 4:1-12. Why did the religious leaders object to Peter and John's preaching? Why were the Apostles a threat?**
2. **Read Acts 4:13-22. How were the religious leaders put into a difficult situation? Why did they make the decision they did?**
3. **Read Acts 4:13 again. What was it about Peter and John that reminded people of Jesus?**
4. **In what ways do you think Christians today should look different than non-Christians?**
  - a. **Matthew 5:16**
  - b. **John 13:35**
  - c. **Galatians 5:22-26**

5. Read Acts 4:18. Why is this statement made by the apostles about obeying God or men a defining statement for our Christian walk?

6. Read Luke 12:11-12. Jesus promised we would be put in situations where our faith would be questioned. What promises are made to us through the Holy Spirit in these moments?

7. Read Acts 4:23-30. How did the Christians respond to the persecution? What did it lead them to do?

8. Where do you see the Holy Spirit in this chapter? How does he help to advance the narrative?

9. What does it look like to speak the word of God boldly today?

## CHANGE

1. What was the last thing you saw God do that you could not help but tell others about?

2. In your life, for whom would you like to pray for boldness in order to speak to them about God?

3. As in Acts 4:31, what ground needs to be shaken in your life? Where do you need to speak boldly?

## WRAP UP

The early church and the lives of the Apostles were marked with boldness. The Holy Spirit within them gave them the confidence to speak with conviction about what they knew God was doing. They prayed for boldness, and God sent a fresh anointing of the Holy Spirit to them with an extra sense of confidence and boldness in what they had to say. The Holy Spirit is bringing that same sense of confidence and boldness to our words yet today. While many may contend the gospel is best preached through actions and not words, the gospel will never be understood if the words are not spoken with confidence as well.

CARE

- How can we pray for each other?
- How can we pray for our church?



# EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Week 8 - Generosity of the Holy Spirit

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# WEEK 8 - GENEROSITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 4:32-5:11 NIV

#### The Believers Share Their Possessions

<sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all <sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

#### Ananias and Sapphira

<sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

<sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

<sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

<sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

## Acts Overview

This is the second "church summary statement" given by Luke so far in the book of Acts. The first summary statement occurred in Acts 2:42-47. The opening two verses are almost identical to Acts 2:43-44. The common themes in the twelve church summary statements in Acts are unity, growth, and health. Here, the theme of unity is highlighted.

Acts 4:32 describes three aspects of unity shared within the Christian community: heart, mind (literally "soul"), and possessions. These keywords remind us, and the Jewish readers of Acts, of the famous Shemah in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."* Some rabbis understood "strength" as one's possessions or resources (Mark Moore, *Acts*, pg. 107).

Barnabas means "son of encouragement." Every time he is mentioned in Scripture, it is positive (Acts 4:36-37; 11:19-20; Acts 13-14). Even though many people gave gifts to the church, Luke records Barnabas' sacrifice as an example above the rest. The selfless generosity of Barnabas is contrasted with the selfish actions of Ananias and Sapphira in the very next story. Generosity is an amazing way to demonstrate and give encouragement to others.

Many people argue all giving should be done in secret. However, this may be an overreaction to what Jesus says in Matthew 6:3-4 NIV: *"But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."*

But notice what Jesus says just before this in Matthew 5:16 NIV *"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* There are times when public generosity can be used to inspire and encourage others to look to God. Generosity breeds generosity and unity in the body.

Jesus is addressing extreme and selfish behavior in Matthew 6:1-18. Giving, praying, and fasting were the three main religious practices all Jews were expected to observe. Many took them to the extreme as a way to show off their piety, like the Pharisees. If one concludes all giving must be done in secret, then why do they not conclude all prayer must be done in secret? See Matthew 6:6! No one takes this literally to mean every single instance of prayer should take place in a closet. Likewise, not all giving should be secretive.

The Bible gives us amazing examples of the public recognition of generosity: Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-54), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Zacchaeus (Luke 19), Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), Theophilus (Luke 1, Acts 1), and Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37).

Ananias and Sapphira had a much different experience with their giving. While they may have been inspired by the actions of Barnabas, they clearly wanted to appear sacrificially generous without the full sacrifice. They wanted people to think they were giving as Barnabas had while keeping some of the money for themselves. They were perpetuating a lie while looking for acclaim.

God's punishment of immediate death reminded the crowd that God sees everything. We may fool each other some of the time, but we can never fool God.

We should not be afraid to give, but we should be cautious and fearful in how we speak of our giving. God is more upset by the lie than the level of our giving. Ananias and Sapphira are severely punished because they indicated they were more devout and more generous to the church than they really were.

## REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. **Can you remember a time you got caught telling a lie?**
2. **What are some causes you support with your time and money? Why?**
3. **When have you done a good thing but had the wrong attitude?**

## DIGGING IN:

1. **What details in verses 32-34 characterize the attitude and actions of the Jerusalem church?**

2. **How can giving to the needy or to the church be a source of encouragement to others? How can it be a cause of contention?**
3. **Read Acts 4:36-37. How does this paragraph and the one before it set the stage for the next story Luke records?**
4. **Read Acts 5:1-11. What did Ananias and Sapphira do that was wrong? Why did they receive such a harsh punishment?**
5. **Peter did not take the actions of Annanias and Sapphira as a personal attack. Instead, who does he say Ananias was hurting? How is this true?**
6. **What power or gift of the Spirit does Peter demonstrate here as he catches Ananias and Sapphira in the lie? (For a hint, see 1 Corinthians 12:10)**

7. Read Acts 5:5 and 11 again. Why does Luke want us to know that fear seized the whole church? How is this a good thing?

8. It seems like Ananias and Sapphira would have been better off not giving anything to the church. Why is this so confusing? What lesson should we take from this?

9. Read Matthew 5:16. How does the story of Ananias and Sapphira compare with what Jesus says? How should we reconcile these thoughts?

## CHANGE

1. How well would you have fit into the early church's practices with one another?
2. What is your motivation for giving to Macomb or other organizations?
3. What are some obstacles to generosity in your life? What are some catalysts for generosity?

## WRAP UP

When the Holy Spirit comes within our lives, he prompts us to take care of each other. Giving is just one way we are prompted to take care of one another's needs. In the first century church, there was a vibrant relationship between the believers. Because of the number of poor people in Jerusalem, food and physical needs were constantly a part of their ministry. While we may not have as many physical needs, taking care of each other is still a part of the DNA of the church. The Holy Spirit will keep our eyes open to those needs, but our hearts need to be ready to respond. That response needs to be driven by the need of the individual or ministry, not our need to be recognized or applauded.

## CARE

- How can we pray for each other?
- How can we pray for our church?



# WEEK 9 - CONVICTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 5:12-42

<sup>12</sup> The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. <sup>13</sup> No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. <sup>15</sup> As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. <sup>16</sup> Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

<sup>17</sup> Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. <sup>18</sup> They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. <sup>20</sup> "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." <sup>21</sup> At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin--the full assembly of the elders of Israel--and sent to the jail for the apostles. <sup>22</sup> But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, <sup>23</sup> "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." <sup>24</sup> On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. <sup>25</sup> Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." <sup>26</sup> At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

<sup>27</sup> Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup> "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." <sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead-- whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. <sup>35</sup> Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. <sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.

<sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." <sup>40</sup> His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

## Acts Overview

### 5:12-16 CHURCH SUMMARY STATEMENT

This section begins with the third church summary statement that continues the themes of miracles and wonders, awe and amazement, and unity and growth. The crowds continue to show awe, wonder, and fear as miraculous signs are displayed by the Apostles with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:43; 3:11; 4:13; 5:5; 5:11). The fanfare following Peter is reminiscent of the crowds who followed Jesus. Just as touching Jesus' cloak could heal someone (Luke 8:40-48), it seems as though Peter could heal through his shadow.

### 5:13 FEAR OR RESPECT?

Verse 13 is a little confusing: people respected the Apostles, but they did not join them. Perhaps this refers to other Christians who were still hesitant to worship Jesus in public and thus face persecution. Perhaps it refers to the Jewish leaders and general population fear of the Apostles, especially after hearing about Ananias and Sapphira. The signs the Holy Spirit was doing through them demanded a level of attention.

### 5:14 WOMEN

"Verse 14 mentions women believing independently of men. This is a significant moment in salvation history. In an androcentric society such as ancient Israel a woman's faith was bound up with that of her husband or father. Here we find women mentioned individually as believers. If Sapphira can be punished apart from her husband, based on her own complicity, then conversely women of faith can be judged righteous apart from their husbands' rejection of the faith. This new pattern will be reflected consistently in the remainder of the book (Acts 8:3, 12; 9:2; 16:1, 13-14; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:2; 22:4)." (Mark Moore, *Acts*, pg. 115)

### 5:17-26 APPROVAL RATINGS

The religious leaders of the Sanhedrin, especially the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy because the Apostles seemed to have better approval ratings than they did with the populace. 5:26 shows the arresting officers were afraid of what the crowd would do to them if they were harsh with the Apostles. The Apostles had the respect and admiration of the crowd but not the religious leaders. The content of the Apostle's message automatically discredited them in the minds of the Sanhedrin.

## 5:27-32 HE'S AN ANGRY PRIEST

Notice why the high priest is so upset. Not only have the Apostles directly disobeyed the instructions of the governing authority, but they publicly humiliated the Sanhedrin by disobeying them in front of so many people. He says the Apostles “have filled Jerusalem with their teaching.” What a compliment! He is also angry because the Apostles are indicating to the public the Sanhedrin/religious leaders are responsible for killing Jesus, which they were, especially the high priest (see Matthew 26:3-4 and Matthew 27:25).

## 5:33-40 GAMALIEL

Gamaliel is an extremely intriguing character in Luke’s narrative. He was a famous, adored, and influential Pharisee who seems to have swayed the opinions of the entire Sanhedrin. Paul even brags about being his disciple (Acts 22:3).

The Gospel of Luke never positively mentions any Pharisee, but the book of Acts records three separate incidents where Pharisees are seen in a positive light (Acts 5:34; 15:5; 23:9). Acts 15:5 indicates some Pharisees were actually a part of the leadership in the early church!

It is ironic a Pharisee came to the rescue of the Apostles when so many Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus and his followers. We do not know if Gamaliel was a secret believer, but it does seem he is sympathetic to the Christian cause. His conclusion in Acts 5:39 may have been a result of Peter and John’s words in Acts 4:19!

## REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. **When have you been in a tough situation where you had to decide whom to obey?**
2. **When have you seen jealousy make people respond to a good thing in a bad way?**
3. **When have you seen maturity make people respond to a bad thing in a good way?**

## DIGGING IN:

1. **Read Acts 5:12-16. How were the Apostles/believers regarded by the crowds? How did their reputation in the community affect their ministry?**
2. **Read Acts 5:17-32. Summarize these events. What stands out to you about the words and actions of the Apostles?**
3. **Read Acts 5:33-40. Who came to the rescue of the Apostles? What was his reasoning?**
4. **Compare Acts 4:19 with Act 5:29. What was the clear priority of the Apostles?**

5. Why do you think God sometimes delivers his followers out of hardships, yet at other times he allows them to suffer? At the two arrests of the Apostles (5:17-20; 5:26-27; 40-41), how did God respond to their dilemma?

6. Read Acts 5:41-42. What emotions and actions did the Apostles have after being arrested, almost killed, and beaten?

7. Verse 32 mentions the apostles and the Holy Spirit were witnesses to Jesus, his death, and his role in our forgiveness and salvation. What do these two scriptures communicate about the importance that the Holy Spirit be a witness to these events?

## CHANGE

1. What can you learn from this passage about obeying human authority and obeying divine authority?

2. How can you respond with rejoicing when you are suffering?

3. Are you proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah in the way God is asking you to proclaim him? (vs. 42) Who would you begin with?

## WRAP UP

The events of this chapter remind us how hands-on God is in the lives of his followers. God's protection is evident. He protects them during the first arrest. He causes the testimony of a Pharisee to thwart the call for their death. Instead, they're beaten, warned not to speak about Jesus, and released. Yet, it is the conviction of the apostles that captures our attention. The events of the trial of chapter four with the conviction they receive from the Holy Spirit carries over into chapter five. It's a similar message spoken this time firmly with clear-cut words: They've been given a divine mandate to speak the name of Jesus. No human authority would keep them from speaking. They were following the testimony of God's Spirit within them.





# WEEK 10 - LEADING BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 6:1-7

#### The Choosing of the Seven

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>So 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. <sup>3</sup>Brothers 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 <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup>This 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.

<sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>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.

## Acts Overview

### HELLENISTIC JEWS

Hellenistic Jews are those who believed in God and followed the Scriptures, but they were "hellenized," meaning they adopted the Greek language, culture, and way of life. In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great sought to spread Greek culture throughout the world through force, a process called Hellenization. According to Greek legend, Hellen was a king from the Thessaly region of Greece and the ancestors of the Hellenes, the Greeks, and their culture. Even today, the true name of the country is Hellas. Hellenistic Jews were people of Greek ancestry who chose to be followers of the God of Israel.

### HEBRAIC JEWS

These are ancestral Jewish people who kept the customs and rituals of the Jewish culture. Many held a sense of superiority over the Hellenistic Jews and converts to the Jewish faith. This tension in the Jewish religion carried over into the Christian church: the discrimination that was present in Judaism now reared its ugly head in Christianity.

### WIDOWS

Widows in the ancient world were especially vulnerable in a patriarchal society. Jobs and inheritances were given to sons not to wives or daughters. Many families lived on a day-to-day income and made no provision for fatherless daughters or widows. The communal structure of the Jewish culture paved the way for the continued care for widows in the early church. This included a formal distribution of food, which was being corrupted by discrimination.

## DEACONS

The seven men who were chosen are not called "deacons" in this story, but their role and function are similar to a deacon's role described in the rest of the New Testament church. Deacons in the early church were faithful men or women who were chosen to be servant-leaders and oversee various tasks in the church. 1 Timothy 3:8-13 gives the standards and expectations of what sort of people were chosen to be leaders. In the church today, the term "deacon" may not appear, but is sometimes replaced with similar roles filled by pastors and ministry team leaders.

## DISCIPLES

This is the first time Christians are referred to as "disciples" in the book of Acts, and the first time the word is used at all in the narrative. A disciple is a faithful follower of Jesus, one who is a learner or pupil. In the Gospels, the word is used to describe the 12 Disciples/Apostles and generally for all followers of Jesus.

## DIVISION OF LABOR

As the early church grew, the Apostles realized they could not do everything and be everywhere. The leadership structure had to grow in order for the movement to keep growing. This is the first indication of division of labor or the decentralization of authority and responsibility in the early church. The Apostles knew their role was to focus on spiritual leadership, so they replicated their influence by appointing leaders who would focus on other tasks. (See Ephesians 4:11-14; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.)

## REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. **If your food order is not correct, do you send it back or deal with it?**
2. **When have you seen a company or church dealing with new problems as they grow?**
3. **When have you seen a problem swept under the rug which then grew into a larger problem?**

## DIGGING IN:

1. Read Acts 6:1-7. Most of the problems in the early church were previously the result of external persecution. Why do you think Luke includes this story?
2. What do you think was an underlying reason for the complaints about the food distribution? (See pg. 32 “Hellenistic Jews” and “Hebraic Jews”)
3. Look at verses 2-4. Does the response of the Apostles sound harsh or uncaring? What leadership principle can we learn from their response?
4. The qualifications for these servant leaders included being known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Why was this qualification important?
5. What do you think could have happened if the Apostles ignored this complaint or swept it under the rug? What leadership principles can we learn from their swift response?

6. Look at verses 5-7 again. All of the names sound like Greek names. Why would this matter? What leadership principles can we learn from this?
7. What are some examples of how prejudice against a group of people have kept the church from investing or ministering to them?
8. Read Ephesians 4:11-13. How does this passage relate to this story in Acts? What are some goals of church leadership in recruiting servants in the church? What are some results?
9. Look at verse 7. What was the result of addressing this problem head-on?

## CHANGE

1. **What are some essential tasks people take responsibility for each week to help our pastors/leaders focus on their main tasks?**
2. **What are some things in your life, that may be good things, that could distract you from focusing on what is most important?**
3. **What is your next step of involvement?**

## WRAP UP

There are always problems and challenges that occur in churches. The first century church wasn't without its challenges. The Apostles and Elders of the first church understood leadership was also a gift of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't just given to them, but this leadership gift was passed out upon other believers as well. While the Apostles' and Elders' leadership gifts were needed in the tasks of teaching and direction, other people's leadership gifts were needed in areas of service. The willful sharing of leadership was one of the strengths of the early church. Leadership was not just reserved for priests, or those from certain family lines. The Holy Spirit was being poured out upon all believers, and all were called to play their part. The more the individuals within the church found a part to play, the stronger the church became, and the more people were drawn to its health.

## CARE

- **How can we pray for each other?**
- **How can we pray for our church?**



# WEEK 11 - SPEAKING BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 6:8-7:53

#### The Choosing of the Seven

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

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

<sup>15</sup> 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's Speech to the Sanhedrin

<sup>1</sup> Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

<sup>2</sup> To 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 Haran. <sup>3</sup> 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' <sup>4</sup> "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.

<sup>5</sup> He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. <sup>6</sup> God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> But 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.' <sup>8</sup> Then 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.

<sup>9</sup> "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. <sup>11</sup> "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. <sup>12</sup> When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. <sup>14</sup> After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.

<sup>15</sup> Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. <sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. <sup>18</sup> Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. <sup>19</sup> He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. <sup>20</sup> "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. <sup>21</sup> When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

<sup>23</sup> "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. <sup>24</sup> He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. <sup>26</sup> 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?' <sup>27</sup> "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' <sup>29</sup> When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

<sup>30</sup> "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. <sup>31</sup> When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: <sup>32</sup> 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> 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.'

<sup>35</sup> "This is the same Moses whom 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. <sup>36</sup> He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. <sup>37</sup> "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' <sup>38</sup> He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. <sup>39</sup> "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. <sup>40</sup> They 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!' <sup>41</sup> That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? <sup>43</sup> You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Having received the tabernacle, our fathers 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, <sup>46</sup> who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built the house for him. <sup>48</sup> "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: <sup>49</sup> "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? <sup>50</sup> Has not my hand made all these things?"

<sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- <sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

## Acts Overview

### LIFE OF STEPHEN

Stephen was one of the seven men selected to serve bread to the Grecian widows. Of the seven men, two of them, Stephen and Phillip, are pointed out in the book of Acts for their service to the Kingdom of God. Beyond serving bread to Grecian widows, Stephen is known as a man full of the Holy Spirit who performs signs and wonders. The term "signs and wonders" is the same phrase used to describe the Apostles as they did miraculous works of healing in the city of Jerusalem. Stephen's ministry caught the attention of a sect of Jewish leaders within the city, and brought him before the Sanhedrin to answer questions about doctrine.

### PROGRESSION OF PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

- Peter/John: arrested and given a warning (4:2)
- Apostles: arrested, flogged, and given a warning (5:40)
- Stephen: arrested, falsely accused, stoned to death (7:60)
- Believers: ongoing persecution for all Christians and "the church"(8:1-3)

### FACE OF AN ANGEL (Acts 6:15)

This is a Jewish idiom (common saying) that meant a person was calm, confident, and resolute in his/her demeanor. The comparison to the face of an angel is that the Sanhedrin were in awe of Stephen's countenance, like they would be of an angel. Though some believe his face was glowing, the Biblical texts do not proclaim that. His face was calm, resolute and bold from divine inspiration and supernatural confidence – evidences of the Holy Spirit's presence.

## REFLECTING

- **Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. **What are some movies or stories where someone is falsely accused?**
2. **What is the best lawyer speech you have ever heard on TV or in a movie?**

## DIGGING IN:

1. **What evidence in chapter 6 shows the work of the church was being spread and done by more than the Apostles?**
2. **Why do you think no one was able to stand against Stephen's wisdom (Acts 6:10)? How do you think his wisdom led to his death?**

3. Verse 10 refers to the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave to Stephen as he spoke. Read Ephesians 1:15-19. What does the Spirit of wisdom cause us to know?

6. How might we be putting too much emphasis on our “man-made” structures while neglecting the real identity of the temple of God, the church?

4. Look at Acts 7:2-48. What parts of Israelite history did Stephen remind them of?

7. What does it mean to resist the Holy Spirit? (Verse 51)

5. Look at verses 51-53. What objections did Stephen make to the religious leaders?

8. Under what circumstances does the Holy Spirit speak through us? See Luke 12:11-12.

## CHANGE QUESTIONS

1. **Can you be described as a person who is full of grace, wisdom, and the Spirit?**
2. **How will I learn the story of God well enough to be able to share all of it?**
3. **How can you show boldness and unleash the Holy Spirit as you tell others about Jesus?**

## WRAP UP

Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. His good works drew the attention of his society. In many ways, he was an easier target for the animosity of the religious leaders than an apostle. As persecution rose and the religious leaders became more aggressive, so the Spirit of God also became more bold. The Spirit speaks through the Apostles in times of confrontation, and Jesus promised this would happen for us, also. But Jesus never promised the people who heard our message would like what they hear. And as we finish Stephen's story next week, Stephen becomes the first martyr for the church because of the animosity of the Sanhedrin. We are called to speak up. The Holy Spirit will prompt us to speak even when the atmosphere is hostile. And though the words we speak may not reach all who are listening, they may reach a few.

## CARE

- **How can we pray for each other?**
- **How can we pray for our church?**

## CARE (CONTINUED)



*But if it is from God,  
you will not be able  
to stop these men;  
you will only find  
yourselves fighting  
against God.*

*Acts 5:39*

# EMPOWERED

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Week 12 - Full of the Holy Spirit

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# WEEK 12 - FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## TEXT

### Acts 7:54-8:4

<sup>54</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> 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. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. <sup>4</sup> Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

## Acts Overview

### LUKE'S DESCRIPTIONS AND COMPARISONS (Acts 7:54-60)

- Religious Leaders:
  - » Furious and gnashed their teeth (7:54)
  - » Covered their ears, yelled at the top of their voices, rushed at him (7:57)
  - » Dragged him out of the city, began to stone him (7:58)
- Stephen:
  - » Full of the Holy Spirit, looks up to heaven, sees the glory of God and Jesus (7:55-56)
  - » Prays for Jesus to receive his spirit (7:59)
  - » Falls to his knees, prays for God to not hold it against them (7:60)

### STEPHEN, THE FIRST MARTYR

Following his defense and the condemnation of the Sanhedrin, Stephen is put to death for his faith. Stephen is the first martyr in the book of Acts, but he will not be the last. Jesus was clear to his disciples. The world would hate us on account of him. And it was not Stephens's good works of feeding widows or his miraculous signs and wonders that he was stoned for: his belief in a living Jesus as the Son of God put him at odds with the religious leaders of his day. A resurrected Jesus did not fit into their theology, yet Stephen and the Apostles continued to talk about the resurrection as the crowning proof of Jesus' divinity and the confirmation of the truth.

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE DEATHS OF STEPHEN AND JESUS

- Falsely accused (Acts 6:11-15; Luke 23:1-25)
- Trial before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:11-7:60; Luke 22:54-71)
- Looked up to heaven before dying (Acts 7:55-56; John 17:1)
- Killed outside of the city (Acts 7:58; Luke 23:26-33)
- Pile of clothes (Acts 7:58; Luke 23:34)
- "Receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59; Luke 23:46)
- Forgive the killers (Acts 7:60; Luke 23:34)
- Persecution broke out (Acts 8:1-3; John 20:19)

### ACTS 8:1 AND ACTS 1:8

Though the chapter and verse numbering are not inspired by God, it is quite ironic how much Acts 1:8 parallels Acts 8:1. Jesus commanded his Apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. We see the inauguration of that directive in Acts 8:1. It is no accident Luke specifically mentions Judea and Samaria. Stephen's speech led to his death and the persecution of all Christians in Jerusalem. But that persecution led to the scattering of God's people throughout the entire region, which is what God commanded and then orchestrated. God's Sovereignty can turn tragedy into victory.

### INTRODUCTION OF SAUL/PAUL

While Saul played no vital role in the stoning of Steven, Luke records his presence and affirmation of Stephen's execution. Luke is introducing the character of Saul before coming to his conversion and ministry. It was important for Luke to convey the depth of Paul's conversion in order for us to understand the difficulty the Jewish early church had accepting him. Saul protected the cloaks of those who did the physical act of stoning Stephen. Saul agreed with his sentence of death. Saul became a persecutor of the church in that culture.

### SCATTERING OF THE CHURCH

This act of open aggression toward members of the church was not curbed by Rome. The aggression grew so the believers in Jerusalem left the city to find other places of refuge in Judea and into the country of Samaria, echoing Acts 1:8. God used this persecution of the church and the scattering of its people to propagate the message in places that had not heard the gospel. Once again, we see God taking what men meant for evil and turning it into good for the purposes of his Kingdom. (See Genesis 50:20)

## REFLECTING

- Think back to the message on Sunday. What stood out to you? What did you discover that was a new thought for you?

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

1. Which is worse: a guilty person declared innocent, or an innocent person convicted of a crime?
2. Who is someone you miss that was once a great defender of the gospel?
3. When have you seen a good outcome from a bad situation?

## DIGGING IN:

1. If Stephen was speaking through the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, why did he suffer and die?
2. What does it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit? (Verse 55) How is this different than the presence of the Holy Spirit?

3. Look at verse 55. Who could Stephen see? Who was watching him?

4. Consider the immediate reaction of the Sanhedrin in verse 57. What caused them to react so immediately and so violently?

5. How is Stephen's trial and death similar to Jesus'? Why do you think Luke records these similarities? (See pg. 50 "Similarities between the death of Stephen and Jesus")

6. Read Acts 8:1-4. Why is it important to read this section along with the story of Stephen's execution? What does this teach us today when we suffer?

**7. What do you believe was the secret of Stephen's ability to face persecution/death with a forgiving heart?**

**8. Look at 8:3. Which persecutions through history are reminiscent of these actions? Are persecutions still happening in 2024?**

## CHANGE QUESTIONS

**1. Are you ready to testify about Jesus in a place that might be hostile?**

**2. How can you more fully surrender to the work of the Spirit in your life?**

**3. How can you make prayer for modern day persecuted Christians more a part of your spiritual work?**

## WRAP UP

While the stoning of Stephen was a blow to the first century church, it also empowered them to go live as the church. Through seeing one of their own become full of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated through bold words, signs and wonders, the church was emboldened. The Holy Spirit was present for all believers, not just important leaders. The Spirit of God was poured out upon all believers, and now the believers were being poured out into new areas of their community and world. If the members of the early church were dependent upon the Apostles, the church would fail at this juncture. But the Church of Jesus was dependent upon the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit, and that made it explode into a world that needed to know Jesus.

## CARE

- **How can we pray for each other?**
- **How can we pray for our church?**

