

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Part 5: Choosing the Seven (chs. 6-7)

(No. 1119 – - NLC)

I. THE SEVEN CHOSEN

Acts 6:1-7: ¹*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.* ²*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.* ³*Brothers, 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* ⁴*and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”*

⁵*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.* ⁶*They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.* ⁷*So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

- A. “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the **Grecian Jews** among them **complained against the Hebraic Jews** because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” (v.1)
1. A considerable length of time may have elapsed since the close of chapter 5.
 2. The church continued to see great growth and expansion, but more growing pains as well.
 3. If the devil cannot destroy by attacks from *without*, he will seek to overthrow by dissension *within*.
 4. Up until this time, the church had always been in one accord, marked by its incredible harmony and unity (see Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:32); now it was being marred by discord
 5. In the early days of the church, it was customary to make daily food distributions for the poor widows who had no other means of support.

6. Some of the believers who had been Greek-speaking Jews complained because their widows were not receiving the same treatment as the widows of Hebrews (those from Jerusalem and Judea)
 7. NLT: “But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were **rumblings of discontent.**”
 8. The flesh dies hard—how sadly these kinds of carnal bickering, factions and infightings surface in many churches, often ending in bitter divisions and splits:
*Gal. 5:15-16 (NKJV): ¹⁵But if you **bite and devour one another**, beware lest you be consumed by one another! ¹⁶I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*
 9. But God gave the apostles wisdom to resolve the situation...
- B. The twelve apostles realized that with the growth of the church, some provision had to be made for handling these business matters; they counseled the church to designate seven spiritual men to handle the food distribution (vv.2-3)
- C. Although these men are not designated **deacons** in the Bible, it is not unreasonable to think of them as such. In the expression, “wait on tables (v.2),” the Greek word used is *diakoneo*, the verb form of the noun from which we get the English word **deacon**, so their function literally was to “deacon” tables:
1. Gk. *diakonos* = to run on errands; an attendant, table waiter; a deacon or deaconess, minister, servant”
 2. Frequently translated “servant or minister in the New Testament, *diakonos* is only translated “deacon” or “deaconess” in 1 Tim. 3:8, 12; Phil. 1:1, Rom. 16: 1 (AMP).
 3. Acts 21:8 (AMP) refers to the Seven as “deacons”: “we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of **the Seven [first deacons]**, and stayed with him.”
- D. “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are **known to be full of the Spirit** and wisdom.” (v.3)
1. In the original text, the apostles specified **three qualifications** that the candidates had to meet:

2. NKJV: “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of **good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom...**”

- a) **Of good reputation** [Gk. *martureo* = “to be a witness, have a good (honest) report, be well reported of”] – they had to be faithful witnesses, men of proven character and with a good reputation and testimony
- b) **Full of the Holy Spirit**
- c) **Full of wisdom** (“good sense” – MSG)
- d) Compare these with Paul’s list of qualifications for deacons given to Timothy:

1 Tim 3:8-12: ***8Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. 11In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. 12A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.***

3. These men were “**known** to be full of the Holy Spirit”

- a) Although not specifically stated, they may have been in the original group of 120 believers filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost
- b) In any event, there was no question or doubt about their spiritual condition! Are we *known to be full of the Holy Spirit* in our church community, or would people have to scratch their head and wonder, *Hmm, I’m not real sure about brother so and so!*

- E. “We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (v.4)

- 1. KJV: “We will **give ourselves continually** to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”
- 2. AMP: “We will continue **to devote ourselves steadfastly** to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

3. The apostles had a clear understanding of their calling and ministry; there **MUST** be leaders like this in the church today who are dedicated and devoted to prayer and the word of God.
 4. The order here is significant—prayer *first*, then ministry!
- F. “This proposal pleased the whole group.” (v.5)
1. What marvelous grace and wisdom God bestowed on these apostles; judging from the names of the seven men who were chosen, the majority of them were Greek-speaking Jews
 2. This was a most gracious concession to the very group that had been complaining; there could be no charge of favoritism thereafter from the Grecians. When the love of God fills men's hearts, it triumphs over pettiness and selfishness!
- G. “Select seven men “whom we may **appoint** over this business” (v.3 – KJV)
1. **Appoint** [Gk. *kathistemi* = “to place down (permanently); to designate, set, ordain”]
 2. Paul used the same word referring to the ordaining of elders (Tit. 1:5 – KJV): “*ordain* elders in every city”
 3. That these men were to be **ordained** to their ministry responsibility by the apostles is confirmed in v.6: “They presented these men to the apostles, who **prayed and laid their hands on them.**”
- H. “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.” (v.7)
1. This is one of many “progress reports” given by Luke from time to time throughout the book of Acts (see Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31)
 2. The provision of deacons to care for business affairs resulted in a great forward thrust for the gospel.
 3. Perhaps the greatest miracle of grace was the large company of *priests* turning to Christ—the very ones who had once sought the destruction of Christ, His apostles, and His teaching.

II. STEPHEN SEIZED

Acts 6:8-15: *⁸Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*

⁹Opposition 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. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." ¹²So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

A. **"Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."** (v.8)

1. Only two of the deacons are well-known to us—**Stephen**, whose story begins here, and **Philip**, the evangelist who later carried the gospel to Samaria (Acts 8), won the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ, and entertained Paul at Caesarea.
2. Stephen is the first man other than an apostle who is said to have performed miracles in the book of Acts. Was he promoted to some higher level or position as a result of his faithfulness in the menial tasks of serving widows? Or was it simply an additional ministry which he carried on while waiting tables? The Scriptures remain silent on this question.

B. **"Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen."** (v. 9)

1. This is, by now, becoming an all-too familiar pattern: God moves, opponents rise up.

2. The “Freedmen” or “Libertines” were perhaps Jews who had been freed from slavery by the Romans; they were from various places: Cyrene (a city in Africa), Alexandria (a seaport of Egypt), Cilicia and Asia (provinces of Asia Minor); they had a reputation of being very zealous Jews.
- C. “These men began to argue with Stephen, but they **could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit** by whom he spoke.” (vv.9-10)
1. The zealots were no match for Stephen for two reasons: his wisdom, and the Holy Spirit by whom he spoke
 2. The power, grace, and anointing that was upon Stephen’s life was irresistible
- D. Unable to win the debate, the Jews, in a desperate move to silence Stephen, secretly induced or bribed false witnesses to accuse him of blasphemy against Moses and God; soon Stephen was standing before the Sanhedrin, charged with speaking against the temple and the law, saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change all of the customs handed down to Israel by Moses. (vv.10-14)
1. This is a very similar script to that of Jesus’ arrest and trial—false witnesses, accusations of blasphemy, etc.
 2. If you can’t win the argument, attack your opponent—this is a classic case of *ad hominem*, a Latin expression which literally means “to the man,” short for *argumentum ad hominem*; it is very common in modern politics whereby an argument is rebutted by attacking the character or motive of the person making the argument, rather than attacking the substance of the argument itself.
- E. “All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and **they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**” (v.15)
1. Had the Sanhedrin heeded the warning given them by Gamaliel, they would have “left these men alone” (Acts 5:38) and quit while they were ahead!
 2. They must have already started feeling a bit uncomfortable at this point, interrogating this would-be blasphemer, all the while fixing their gaze on his angelic countenance.

3. No doubt, as Stephen was gazing into the face of Jesus Christ, his face was reflecting some of that glory for his Jewish attackers to behold (see 2 Cor. 3:13-18; 4:6; Acts 7:55-56)

III. STEPHEN'S SPEECH BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

- A. In this masterful speech—one of about 1,200 words that would only take 6 or 7 minutes to deliver— Stephen demonstrated his thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and the history of Israel. He would first show his listeners his familiarity and identification with the Jewish people (“our father Abraham,” “our fathers,” “our people,”) and his great love for the nation of Israel.
- B. He would use the stories of Joseph and Moses (types of the rejection of Christ), both chosen by God yet rejected by their own people, to show how in the past, Israel had rejected the very saviors God raised up to deliver them. This was to lead up to the story of Jesus, the Savior whom they had betrayed and murdered.
- C. He recounted the many times in their history that the Jewish people had been rebellious, stiff-necked, disobedient, turning to idols, even persecuting and killing the prophets God sent to them.
- D. Stephen would finish with this stinging indictment: “You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!”

Acts 7:1-53: *¹Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?”*

²To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ³‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’ ⁴So 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. ⁵He 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.

⁶God 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. ⁷But I will punish the nation they

serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship Me in this place.’ ⁸Then He gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

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

¹¹“Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. ¹²When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. ¹³On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. ¹⁴After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. ¹⁵Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. ¹⁶Their 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.

¹⁷As the time drew near for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. ¹⁸Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. ¹⁹He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

²⁰“At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father’s house. ²¹When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. ²²Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

²³“When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. ²⁴He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. ²⁵Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. ²⁶The 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?'

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

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

³³"Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground.' ³⁴I 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.'

³⁵**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. ³⁶He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

³⁷This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' ³⁸He 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.

³⁹**But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him** and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. ⁴⁰They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' ⁴¹That 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. ⁴²But 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? ⁴³You 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.

⁴⁴Our 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. ⁴⁵Having 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, ⁴⁶who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built the house for Him.

⁴⁸However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. What kind of house will you build for Me? says the Lord. Or where will My resting place be? ⁵⁰Has not My hand made all these things?'

⁵¹You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was 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— ⁵³you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

E. Stephen showed in a powerful way how history repeats itself—in every generation we can find the same pattern—people are the same:

1. When confronted with God's message, they do not understand (v.25)
2. When urged to live at peace, they refuse to listen (v.27)
3. When given a God-sent deliverer, they reject him (v.39)
4. When delivered miraculously from bondage or some other evil, they prefer useless idols to the merciful God (v.41)
5. Such is human nature—rebellious, ungrateful, foolish

F. But Stephen would also show how God is always the same:

1. The God who spoke to Moses was the same God who had spoken to his ancestors (v.32)

2. This God hears when people are oppressed and in trouble, and He comes to deliver (v.34)
 3. He leads His people from bondage into freedom and abundance, from death to life (v.36)
- G. In his speech, **Stephen was asked to answer the following charges:**
1. He had **blasphemed Moses and God** (Acts 6:11)—Stephen's response: *they* had rejected Moses and refused to obey him (vv.25, 35, 39), rejecting and crucifying the Prophet that Moses had foretold (v.37) [see *Section II.G.* of Part 4, p.43.]
 2. He had **spoken against the temple and the Law**, saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and the customs of Moses (Acts 6:13-14)—Stephen's response: Israel had the tabernacle of Testimony in the wilderness, but during that same time they were worshiping false gods like Molech, Rephan, and the heavenly bodies (vv.42-44); he then quoted Solomon and Isaiah, who both stated that God doesn't dwell in man-made temples (vv.47-50); Stephen also showed how the Law he had purportedly spoken against had never been honored or obeyed by the Jews—they had always stubbornly refused to follow the precepts that Moses had given them (vv.38-39, 53)
- H. To conclude, **Stephen leveled his charges** against the Jewish Council:
1. "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (v.51)
 - a) **Stiff-necked** – obstinate, stubborn, unyielding; like oxen that refused to be yoked
 - b) **Uncircumcised** – hard, calloused; circumcision was the very sign of being a Jew—this placed them in the same category as the uncircumcised Gentiles
 - c) **You always resist the Holy Spirit** – this new movement that they were attacking had begun on the day of Pentecost with the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy by a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit—it wasn't *man* they were resisting—it was the *Holy Spirit* Himself

2. “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.” (v.52)

- a) These words are reminiscent of some of the scathing rebukes Jesus spoke against the Pharisees and religious hypocrites when He was on earth:

Mat. 23:27-35: ²⁷*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.* ²⁸*In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

²⁹*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, **you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.*** ³⁰*And you say, “If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”* ³¹*So you testify against yourselves that **you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.*** ³²*Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!*

³³*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?* ³⁴*Therefore **I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog*** in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵*And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.*

- b) The final prophet they murdered was God’s Righteous One, Jesus Christ
3. “You who have received **the law** that was put into effect through angels but **have not obeyed it.**” (v.53)
4. **Acts 7:51-53 (MSG):** ⁵¹*“And you continue, so bullheaded! Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears! Deliberately*

ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors.

⁵²Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment? Your ancestors killed anyone who dared talk about the coming of the Just One. And you've kept up the family tradition—traitors and murderers, all of you. ⁵³You had God's Law handed to you by angels—gift-wrapped!—and you squandered it!”

- I. Whew! Nothing more needed to be said! Indeed, nothing more could be said! They had sought to put Stephen on the defensive, but he became the prosecutor and they the guilty defendants. This would be one of God's final messages to the Jewish people before the gospel started moving out to the Gentiles.

IV. THE STONING OF STEPHEN

Acts 7:54-60: *⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged 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.

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

- A. “When they heard this, **they were furious** and gnashed their teeth at him.” (v.54)
 1. One commentator has observed that if Stephen had just chosen his words a bit more carefully, things might have gone better for him!
 2. This was not a lesson in political correctness—this was a man full of the Holy Spirit, boldly and fearlessly speaking God’s word (remember the prayer in Acts 4:29-31).
 3. **Furious** – from the same Greek word *diaprio* used in Acts 5:33 [see *Section IX.E* on p.64 of Part 4] which means

“to saw asunder, exasperate, cut to the heart;” in the KJV it is translated “cut to the heart.”

4. Basically, Stephen had just taken a Holy Ghost chainsaw to their stony hearts and they went off on him, grinding their teeth, which loosely translated, means, “We’re so mad we’re going to have this guy for dinner!”
- B. “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.” (v.55)
1. Note the stark contrast between the discomposure of the rejecters of the gospel (Stephen’s words had sawn them asunder, bringing as much torture to their souls as has ever been unleashed on Christian martyrs in their bodies) and the wonderful composure of Stephen (he had a face like an angel, was full of the Holy Spirit, and prayed for their forgiveness).
 2. He saw Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God;
 - a) Many Scriptures refer to Christ *sitting* at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1-2; Mat. 26:64; Mark 16:19; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3)
 - b) But Stephen saw Him *standing*; some believe that Jesus gets up from His throne in glory and stands to honor and welcome every martyr as they enter His heavenly kingdom!
- C. “At this they **covered their ears** and, **yelling** at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, **dragged him** out of the city and began to stone him.” (vv.57-58)
1. Like the stings of hornets or scorpions, Stephen’s words had brought such torment to their darkened minds that they went wild, yelling and screaming, rushing at him like madmen
 2. They covered their ears, but the ears of their hearts had long been sealed: “He that has ears to hear, let him hear.”
- D. “Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named **Saul**.” (v.58)
1. The Holy Spirit leaves a little sidebar, almost incidentally mentioning the name of a young man who stood guard over

the clothes of Stephen's executioners—Saul. God seemed to be saying, "Remember that name. You will hear it again!"

2. Witnessing Stephen's death had a profound effect on Paul, as he would later testify after his conversion:

Acts 22:20: *And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.*

- E. "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, **receive my spirit**.' 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." (vv.59-60)
 1. Stephen's death resembled that of Jesus in several ways:
 - a) He prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59). Jesus had prayed, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46)
 - b) He prayed, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (v.60). Jesus had prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34)
- F. **Acts 7:54-60 (MSG):** ⁵⁴*At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective.* ⁵⁵*But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all His glory with Jesus standing at His side.* ⁵⁶*He said, "Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God's side!"* ⁵⁷*Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede,* ⁵⁸*they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks. The ringleaders took off their coats and asked a young man named Saul to watch them.* ⁵⁹*As the rocks rained down, Stephen prayed, "Master Jesus, take my life."* ⁶⁰*Then he knelt down, praying loud enough for everyone to hear, "Master, don't blame them for this sin"—his last words. Then he died. Saul was right there, congratulating the killers.*

V. CONCLUSION

- A. Historians tell us that a considerable amount of time elapsed between Luke's account in Acts chapter 5 and that of chapter 6. The Jerusalem church continued to grow and, as with any

church, this growth created new challenges and inevitable problems—both form within and without.

- B. The apostles began to organize various activities and ministries within the church, ordaining the first deacons. One of these was Stephen, a mighty man of God with a powerful ministry of signs and wonders.
- C. Opposition to the Way had been increasing in intensity, growing from threats and a night in jail in chapter 4, to imprisonment, threats, beatings and a desire to put the apostles to death in chapter 5. But in chapter 7, the jealousy and fury of the Jewish religious establishment reached a climax; they would produce the first martyr in the Christian church—Stephen.
- D. Another deacon, Philip, along with an even greater wave of persecution, would play a major role in the next phase of God's program—taking the gospel to Judea and Samaria...