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Acts of the Apostles - Lesson 6

Chapter 6

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- Today we begin the story of Stephen
 - Commonly known as the first martyr of the Church
 - He was also the first deacon
 - And deacons have traditionally played the role of martyr ever since
 - The story has two parts or divisions, which follow neatly in two chapters
 - Chapter 6 tells the story of why and how Stephen received his appointment as well as Stephen’s witnessing of the Gospel
 - Chapter 7 covers Stephen’s martyrdom, including his famous monologue summarizing God’s plan for redemption
 - At the end of Chapter 7 we also see a hint of Luke’s second main character in the book of Acts
 - Stephen’s story becomes the link between Luke’s protagonist in the first part of Acts (Peter) and his protagonist in the second half of the story (Paul)
- To start, we need to finish the final two verses of Chapter 5, which set the stage for the events of Chapter 6

Acts 5:41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Acts 5:42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

- After the second trial and flogging of the apostles, they went back to the brethren
 - They had been beaten and threatened with more severe punishment
 - Yet they left rejoicing
 - The reason for rejoicing was the way the Lord had counted them worthy to suffer shame for His Name
 - Jesus Himself had told the disciples that they would be blessed when persecuted

Matt. 5:10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

Matt. 5:12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- The disciples knew this, and as persecution came upon the apostles, they naturally rejoiced
 - Truly, it was an honor
 - The honor comes from how God is using our life to mirror His Son’s life, in particular mirroring His sacrificial death

- Not every Christian is granted this honor
- And the apostles rejoiced at having been counted worthy for that honor
- God purposes in granting it now and in this way it seems to be preparation for what will follow in Chapter 6
 - The leaders of the early Church were the Apostles
 - But the Apostles were hardly the only ones who would suffer persecution
 - And God has determined not to bring the Apostles to death too quickly, since they were needed to build this early church
 - So it stands to reason that other disciples would be appointed to be among the first to die
 - That leads us into Chapter 6, where we encounter Stephen
- So the Apostles gladly ignored the command of the council and kept teaching and preaching, which kept growing the church

Acts 6:1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

Acts 6:2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

Acts 6:3 “Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

Acts 6:4 “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Acts 6:5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Acts 6:6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

- So at this time the church is growing
 - And with growth comes growing pains
 - Christians are people, and anytime people gather, relationship difficulties can develop
 - And the solution to disunity is strong leadership
 - Here we’re witnessing the second example of internal threats to unity within the early church (the first being Ananias and Sapphira)
 - A complaint arose – the term in Greek is *goggusmos*, which means to murmur or secretly complain
 - It tells us that discontent was percolating and threatening to erupt into something more serious

- The two groups involved were Jews from different origins
 - The first group are Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews
 - They came from outside the land of Israel and have returned to settle in Jerusalem
 - The second group are Hebrews
 - Which means they are Jews from within the land who speak Hebrew and Aramaic
 - There was long history of tension between these groups
 - Hebrews were more conservative and a bit haughty
 - Hellenistic Jews were more liberal and less likely to following the Law
- Both of these groups had their respective widows
 - Widows were especially vulnerable members of society, and the church placed an emphasis on showing respect for widows
 - This may have been one reason why the church stood out positively in the culture
 - Especially against the backdrop of the Pharisees, who showed no regard for widows despite requirements in the Law to do so
 - The church supported widows by taking collections and distribution money and food to the widows to support them
- Somewhere along the way, this process began to fail
 - The widows of the local Hebrew Jews were receiving a disproportionate share of the support
 - The text says that the widows of the Hellenistic Jews were being overlooked or shortchanged
 - How would something like this arise? Who would have instigated it or permitted it?
 - Today, we would assume it was the fault of a church leader who was biased or incompetent
 - But at this point in the church's history, there are only the apostles in leadership
 - And we know the Apostles weren't the kind of men to condone this type of favoritism
 - So we can rule out the possibility that they were the cause of the favoritism
 - That means that the unfair distribution of food was the result of the congregation itself conducting the distribution in a biased fashion in favor of the Hebrew widows
 - It's likely that the greater number of Jews in the Jerusalem Church were Hebrew
 - So the majority of the church body probably favored the Hebrew widows, naturally resulting in the unfair distribution

- And when the Hellenistic widows raised a complaint, a dispute arose
 - We can see a pattern emerging here in Luke's account
 - The enemy works to divide the church over temptations of money, possessions and honor or pride
 - Think Ananias and Sapphira
 - Or he works to intimidate the brethren through persecution
 - Which forms the second half of Stephen's story
- This incident highlighted to the Apostles the need for additional leadership in the church to watch over the flock
 - So in response to the argument, the Apostles act
 - They bring the entire church together and announce the need for additional leaders
 - The reason for additional leaders is obvious
 - The needs of the church had grown beyond the capability of 12 men to handle everything
 - The Apostles express the need by saying it is not desirable (or pleasing) for them to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables
 - Let's consider what the apostles are proposing
 - First, the word pleasing suggests that the apostles know there is an audience watching their actions
 - The audience is the Lord, of course
 - Secondly, the thing that will displease the Lord is neglecting the word of God for lessor
 - The highest levels of leadership in the church were to be primarily – if not exclusively – devoted to teaching God's word
 - To do otherwise would not be pleasing to God's word
 - Even something as important and loving as feeding helpless widows was not as important as teaching God's word
 - Obviously, the need still had to be met, which is why the Apostles move to appoint deacons
 - But it's worth remembering that the model presented here is that the role of a congregational leader – pastor – is to teach God's word
 - And nothing should come before that duty (they were to be “devoted” to prayer and the word)
 - Other duties should be performed by other leaders
 - In my opinion, the pastor's weekly schedule should be dominated by teaching and preparation for teaching
- So the apostle bring the congregation together and announce the decision
 - The announcement makes clear three things to the congregation
 - Teaching God's word is preeminent in the church

- Other needs will be met by other (lessor) leaders
- These leaders have the backing of the apostles
- The selection process was also placed in the hands of the congregation
 - Though we remember that Acts was not written as a manual for church operation, nevertheless this practice is consistent with Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy and Titus
 - Suggesting that this practice for identifying leaders is intended to be a model
 - Here's the model:
 - The pastoral leadership of a church is a plurality of teachers with manifest authority to conduct the church's affairs
 - They are not beholden to the congregation
 - The sheep do not lead the shepherd
 - Since we do not have apostles today, we refer to these leaders as elders
 - Paul told Titus to appoint elders

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

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 - So a shepherd appoints elders, based on their qualification to teach
 - The congregation selects deacons
 - Leadership from among themselves to minister to the other needs of the body
 - These lessor leaders also have qualifications, as Paul outlines in 1 Timothy and Titus
 - Here the qualifications are good reputation, the anointing of the Spirit
 - Reputation is *martureo* or witness or testimony
 - They must have a life and walk in faith that bears witness to godliness
 - It wraps up all that Paul outlines later in his letters
 - Then they must be full of the Spirit, which means having a life obviously under the control and direction of the Spirit
 - One thing (Spirit-led life) leads to the other (good reputation)
- The seven men selected are an interesting group
 - First, Stephen gets the most attention, because of his later focus in the chapter
 - Phillip is listed second because of his role in Chapter 8
 - The rest have no further mention in the Bible
 - All the names are Greek, indicating they were Hellenistic Jews
 - And one of them, Nicolas, was a Greek who converted to Judaism
 - This shows that the election of the deacons was clearly under the Spirit's

direction

- We might have expected at least an even distribution of Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews
 - Or even a predominantly Hebrew selection
- But it was all Hellenistic Jews, showing that the Spirit was working to correct for the biases in the group
- Finally, they were confirmed in their ministry with a laying on of hands
 - This is an important step
 - The men are nominated by the congregation but appointed by the apostles (elders)
 - And the laying on of hands symbolically represents the anointing work of the Spirit
 - All authority and power for ministry comes from the Spirit
- Now look at the result of this step

Acts 6:7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

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- The word of God kept spreading because the apostles were freed from other responsibilities
 - This in turn led to the further increase of the church – and exceeding numbers
 - And now a new element
 - Priests, one after another, were coming into the faith
 - This is a remarkable footnote, because the priests of that day would have been Sadducees, since the Sadducees were in power during this time
 - And we see God adding to the church from among the ranks of their enemy in the city
 - And this revelation is likely the cause of the next episode of external threat to the church

Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Acts 6:9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

Acts 6:10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Acts 6:11 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

Acts 6:12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they

came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.

Acts 6:13 They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;

Acts 6:14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

- Stephen is working in the full power of the Spirit
 - And he has evidently received supernatural power to perform miracles and teach with authority
 - We know in Chapter 8 that Phillip has been given similar powers, so apparently the seven deacons were equipped in a similar fashion
 - Stephen and Phillip are clearly not capable of these things prior to their appointment, so the power traces to the Apostles
 - This is an example of how the Apostles were able to appoint others to perform miracles
 - But these seven are never shown transferring those same powers further
 - It stopped with them because it had to originate with Apostles
 - Secondly, notice that Stephen is not depicted waiting tables
 - No doubt he did his fair share of table waiting, but it’s also likely that he and the other seven appointed others to that task
 - They were deacons, leaders
 - This meant they had responsibilities to lead and run the congregation
- Stephen encounters a group of Hellenistic Jews and proceeds to present the truth of the Gospel to them from Scripture while in a synagogue
 - This is the first example of the disciples preaching inside synagogues
 - Paul later made this his usual practice in every new city he visited
 - He brought the gospel to the Jew first, seeking the remnant, but then quickly moved to the Gentiles, his primary calling
 - Luke identifies these men as members of the Synagogue of Freedmen
 - Jewish records indicate there were somewhere between 390-480 different synagogues in the city of Jerusalem
 - This synagogue was founded by formerly enslaved Jews, who returned to the city
 - Other groups involved were
 - Cyrenians, which were Jews from North Africa
 - Alexandrians which were Jews from Egypt
 - Cilicia, which were Jews from Turkey
 - This last group included Tarsus, which was Saul’s (Paul) hometown
 - Perhaps Saul was in this group unable to argue against Stephen’s wisdom

- Since the men couldn't win the argument, their pride was injured and their anger turned to conspiracy
 - So they stirred up others to spread rumors and lies
 - They accused Stephen of blasphemy
 - The literal blasphemy under Jewish law was speaking the name of God, which Stephen had not done
 - Instead they said he spoke against Moses and God, probably because he proclaimed the end of the Law
 - This led to the Elders dragging Stephen away and bringing him to the Council for yet another inquest
 - Stephen is accused before the council of two offenses:
 - Declaring the end of the Temple
 - Likely a repetition of Jesus' own words, referring to the replacing of the house of stone with the Temple of the Body of Christ
 - This charge would have been an offense to the Sadducees who operated and protected the Temple grounds
 - Secondly, he is accused of destroying the customs of the Law from Moses
 - Certainly, this refers to the end of the Law now that grace has come in Jesus Christ
 - This charge would have incited the minority party on the council, the Pharisees
 - So the charges against Stephen are designed to make everyone mad at him
 - This sets the stage for Stephen's persecution