

Episode: Acts Series No. 3

Narrator: Stephen

Primary Scriptures: Acts 6-7

Story Summary: Stephen as one of the Seven; Stephen's trial and death

Location: Roman Empire; Tetrarchy of Judea; Jerusalem

Time: 30 AD Death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Pentecost.

32 AD (?) Trial and death of Stephen

Suggested Memory Scriptures: Acts 6:4, 7, 10; 7:58

For the first few years after Pentecost, the apostles and believers in Jerusalem continued to practice Judaism while teaching about Jesus. This allowed them to meet and teach in the synagogues and in the Temple, but as the early Church grew, so did the conflict between Christians and the Jewish leaders.

As the Christians became excluded from Jerusalem's Jewish society, they began replicating the social services inherent in the Jewish culture, including the feeding of widows and orphans. Stephen was one of the seven men chosen to help equitably distribute food and other services. This allowed the apostles to continue spending all of their time in preaching, teaching, and in prayer.

It is quite interesting that the apostles let the people choose among themselves who would be responsible for the food distribution. The people wisely chose men who were among those who felt mistreated.

Stephen's preaching was so effective that the Jewish leaders put him on trial. Stephen began his defense by recounting the history of the Jews. His words were so articulate and accurate that they had no cause to argue against him. But when he compared them to their ancestors, the leaders exploded and had him put to death. Apparently, something had changed since the trial of Jesus, when the leaders could not sentence Jesus to death. Whatever changed appears to have been permanent, since it inaugurated a wave of capital punishment by the leaders.

Discussion Questions:

1. This episode presents Stephen as being single and from Greece. What other alternatives can you think of?
 2. In the time of Jesus, how do you think the Jewish pilgrims felt when they saw the chaos and commercial activities surrounding the Temple?
 3. It was only a few years since the trial of Jesus when the Jewish leaders did not have the authority to put Jesus to death. What changed so that they had the ability to kill Stephen?
 4. Why was Stephen's death and the ensuing persecution helpful to the growth of the church?
 5. Name some ways that God eased the path for early Christianity to spread.
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1. Caused the believers to scatter to other cities and countries where the Sanhedrin was less influential. Weeded out the weak and uncommitted believers. 2. Roman highways, Pax Romana, Greek as a common international language, persecution by Jews.

Application Questions:

1. The apostles allowed the people to choose the men who distributed food. When is the last time you allowed someone to make a choice that you could have made for them? Are you typically more worried about exerting your authority or seeing that other people are allowed to grow?
2. Stephen was perhaps just as learned in tradition as the Jewish leaders of his time, but when he heard the gospel, he understood it while they did not. Why was he able to understand? What parallels do you see in our own culture today? What steps can you take to help others understand?
3. When Stephen was brought before those in power, he, like Jesus, was accused of crimes he didn't commit, and Stephen, like Jesus, chose not to defend himself. Would you be able to do the same? How might such an attitude play out today?
4. On the spur of the moment, and under great pressure, Stephen was able to recount what he knew about the Bible in great detail. What would you have to do to be capable of doing the same thing? Would memorizing more Scripture be important in doing so?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. The seven men to serve the early church based on just two parameters – they had to be full of the Spirit and full of wisdom. How did these men achieve those characteristics? Could you find part of the answer in Proverbs? How could you start working toward being full of the Spirit and wisdom? [look at Acts 6:10]
2. People were drawn to Stephen and the apostles because of their devotion to Jesus. Can the same be said of you? Why or why not?
3. Stephen obviously knew the Bible well. What are you doing to know the Bible better?