

FPFWC Christian Development



Faithful vs. Faithless

March 2024

Spring Quarter

March 23, 2024

Lesson #4 – Living In Faith

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Acts 6:7-15

ICE BREAKERS-

1. What should we do when we are falsely accused?
2. Why is it important that your actions, attitudes, and expressions indicate to others that you are a follower of Christ? How do you do that?

Key Verse: “Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake”.—Acts 6:9–10

LESSON BACKGROUND –

Lesson Context: First-Century Church

After Jesus’ ascension, the number of believers increased and were “added” to the numbers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47b; 5:14; 6:1). The expanding number of believers led them to develop habits for their gatherings and expectations for how they would treat each other (see 2:42–47a; 4:32–35).

During that time, almost all believers were ethnically Jewish. However, not all had the same cultural upbringing. Some had lived in the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) portions of the Roman Empire, while others lived in Jewish regions of Palestine. The differences between these groups of first-century Jews led to conflict regarding the treatment of widows (Acts 6:1). As a result, the apostles faced challenges while trying to oversee the church (6:2).

To ease the load for the apostles, they selected seven men to handle specific tasks (see Acts 6:3–4). The book of Acts mentions two of these seven men in further detail: Philip (8:4–40) and Stephen (6:8–8:1). In some ways, the role of these seven men was analogous to the position of deacon (see 1 Timothy 3:8–13). The word *deacon* comes from the Greek noun *diakonos*, which is not used in Acts 6. However, a variation of that word does appear in Acts 6 and is translated as “ministry” (Acts 6:4). The term describes some aspects of the work of the apostles.

C. Lesson Context: The Jerusalem Temple

For first-century Judaism, the temple in Jerusalem served as the faith's physical and spiritual center. The temple complex was the focus of the people's worship and served as the headquarters for religious leadership.

Several versions of the Jewish temple existed. Construction on the first began in about 966 BC during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 6:1). After 13 years, Solomon's Temple was completed (7:1) and dedicated (1 Kings 8). During his reign, the temple became a place to worship God and store valuable artifacts. As such, it was a notable place for enemy forces to plunder (example: 14:25–28).

In 597 BC, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, took the people into exile, and looted Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 24:10–14). In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple and took the remaining artifacts from the temple (25:8–17).

There would be attempts to rebuild this place of worship. In 538 BC, the Persian king Cyrus allowed Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see Ezra 1:1–4; 6:1–12; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23). Under the oversight of Zerubbabel (see Ezra 3:2, 8; 4:2), construction faced delays. Eventually, it was finished, and the temple was dedicated in 515 BC (see 5:1–6:22). That temple—sometimes called Zerubbabel's Temple—was smaller and less impressive than the temple of Solomon's day (see Haggai 2:3).

Over time, Zerubbabel's Temple experienced harsh treatment. Greek king Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes (reigned 175–164 BC), desecrated that temple and took its treasures (see nonbiblical 1 Maccabees 1:20–28). His actions led the people to revolt to free Jerusalem and the temple from foreign powers.

Their freedom was temporary. In 63 BC, Roman general Pompey desecrated the temple and its sacred artifacts. Although in shambles, the temple was not entirely demolished. It needed renovation and restoration.

The temple mentioned in the Gospels was the one renovated by Herod the Great (reigned 47–4 BC). Work on that temple began in around 20 BC (compare John 2:20). Construction on the temple complex was completed in about AD 64. The first-century Jewish leaders were not about to let anyone else again defile their holy place. They were especially not going to allow anyone to speak harshly against the building and its associated customs.

LESSON COMMENTARY

6:5–7. Judging from the names of those chosen, the proto-deacons were Hellenistic rather than Hebraic Jews. Since the church had neglected the Hellenistic Jewish widows, they intentionally put Hellenistic Jews in charge of the ministry. Luke introduced **Stephen**, who became a key figure in proclaiming Christ to the Sanhedrin (chap. 7) and **Philip**, who was instrumental in taking the gospel to the Samaritans (chap. 8).

The decision by the larger group was confirmed by the apostles through prayer and the symbolic laying on of hands. Stephen and Philip were already Spirit-filled and men of wisdom. The laying on of hands indicated that the apostles commissioned them as their representatives in this ministry to the widows. Furthermore, as apostolic representatives, both Stephen and Philip functioned as apostolic legates in preaching the gospel and thereby were able to perform signs and wonders (6:8; 8:6).

From the church's handling of this problem, three helpful principles can be discerned: (1) Rapid growth will challenge the resources of the church, and the church should be ready

and willing to reorganize to meet needs. (2) Neglect of the needy for any reason is unacceptable in the church. Faith in Christ transcends all ethnic and cultural differences. (3) In ministry, church leaders should focus on the priorities of prayer and teaching the Word.

Luke summarized the first section (panel) of his story of the church by focusing on the church's remarkable growth. The message (Word of God) continued its successful march outward from Jerusalem; God multiplied the disciples in Jerusalem; and a notable number of priests became obedient to the faith. The explanation for the amazing birth and growth of the church is that Christ is alive and that He has poured out the Holy Spirit on His followers exactly as He had promised.

II. The Extension of the Church: Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31)

A. Stephen: Witness to the Jews (6:8–8:3)

1. The Seizure of Stephen (6:8–7:1)

a. The Context of Stephen's Life (6:8–10)

This section (6:8–9:31) introduces a new unit (panel) in the story of the church. Luke turned the inspired spotlight on three men: Stephen, Philip, and Paul. In preparation for the universal mission of the church, each of these men witnessed to a different ethnic group of people: Stephen to Hellenistic Jews, Philip to Samaritans, and Paul was divinely chosen and commissioned to take the gospel to Gentiles.

Because the believers were determined to obey God rather than men, it was inevitable that one of Christ's followers would pay the ultimate price for his devotion. Stephen became the first martyr of the church. To understand the rage that drove the Sanhedrin to stone Stephen, it is necessary to identify the traditional beliefs that preserved Judaism. There are three: land, law, and temple. First, the Jewish leadership correctly believed that God had promised Abraham and his descendants a country to call their own (Gn 12:1–3). The problem was thinking that God could only actively work in this land. Second, while they correctly understood God had given Israel the law through Moses, the leadership were confused about themselves being the guardians of the law. Third, they correctly believed in the sanctity of the temple as the dwelling place of God. However they were mistaken in believing that His presence in the temple guaranteed blessing and protection. In his speech, Stephen challenged their mistaken ideas about the land, the law, and the temple, and charged them with rejecting their own Messiah Jesus.

6:8. Stephen was full of **grace and power**. The combination seems paradoxical, yet the two are related. Grace and power are divine provisions that gave Stephen an attractiveness of character and strength of spirit. As one popular preacher has stated, Stephen was "tender yet tough." He demonstrated his power in miracles. It is significant for the widespread development of the church that God worked miraculously through Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew, in the same way as He did through the apostles, Hebraic Jews. He could do so because the apostles had laid their hands on him (6:5), so he functioned as an apostolic representative.

6:9–10. Yet, in spite of his gracious character and powerful ministry, Stephen faced fierce opposition from **the Synagogue of the Freedmen**. The Synagogue of the Freedmen consisted of Jews from foreign countries who were formerly slaves, but had gained their

freedom and organized a synagogue in Jerusalem. Although it is not stated, they were most likely offended by Stephen's outspoken faith in Jesus as Israel's Messiah, so they challenged him publicly. However, they were frustrated by Stephen's **wisdom and the Spirit**. His arguments made sense, and the Spirit convicted them that his message about the Messiah was true.

b. The Charge Brought against Stephen (6:11–7:1)

6:11–12. These Freedmen convinced some of their sympathizers to accuse Stephen, charging him with blasphemy against Moses and God, both capital offenses (Ex 22:28; Lv 24:11–16). Stephen was brought forcibly before the Sanhedrin.

6:13–14. The specific charges were somewhat of a misrepresentation of what Jesus had said about the temple and the law, though He warned about the end of both. It is impossible to know if the accusations were related to anything specific because the witnesses were persuaded to testify against Stephen.

6:15–7:1. Stephen's face had the countenance of an angel, meaning he had the appearance of one who stands in the presence of the Lord. In response to the question of the high priest (7:1), Stephen gave a panorama of Jewish history challenging the overconfident beliefs of his countrymen on matters concerning (1) the land, (2) the law, and (3) the temple. Their overconfidence was rooted in their mistaken notion that possession of all three blessings, legitimately promised to Israel in the OT, indicated that God's favor rested upon them at that time regardless of their sinful actions and attitudes, especially against their Messiah and His people. Stephen focused on Abraham and Joseph to refute the misconception that Israel's presence in the promised land was evidence of God's favor.

LESSON NUGGET – The unbelievers treated Stephen the way the Sanhedrin treated Jesus: they arrested him on trumped-up charges and hired false witnesses to testify. Stephen experienced “the fellowship of His sufferings: (Philippians 3:10), and so will you if your witness hits home (Matthew 5:11-12). They said Stephen was opposing Moses, but he had a shining face just like Moses (Exodus 34).

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Word for Today Bible, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary