

Jesus Builds – the book of Acts

Lesson Ten | Acts 6:8-8:1a

Background

The book of Acts was written by the physician, Luke, as a continuation of his Gospel. Jesus said he would build his church and Acts is the earliest history we have about that. It begins with the Ascension on Mount Olivet and then tracks the development of the early church with a particular focus on Peter in the early chapters and Paul in the later chapters, taking us to the early AD 60s.

Context

Acts 6:1-7 presents one of the first growing pains in the early church – a disagreement about the distribution of assistance to the widows. Seven men are appointed to take care of the task so that the apostles can focus their time on prayer and their preaching ministry. One of those 7 men is Stephen, “man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5) He is introduced there because he would soon be martyred.

Bible Study Tip

When details about an event or person appear in multiple places in the Bible, we do well to compare and contrast those details.

The Martyrdom of Stephen

1. At a high level the book of Acts may be divided as follows:

- The Witness in Jerusalem (1:1-6:7)
- The Witness in All Judea and Samaria (6:8-9:31)
- The Witness to the Extremity of the Earth (9:32-28:31)

2. **The Opposition:** Stephen’s preaching draws the attention of the Freedmen’s Synagogue, which has people from Cyrene and Alexandria (leading towns in North Africa), Asia (western part of Turkey), and the province of Cilicia. (Acts 6:8-9)

3. **The Great Debater:** We are told that the Jews of the Freedmen’s Synagogue could not stand toe-to-toe with Stephen’s words (6:10), and so they decided to stir up allegations against him and present false witnesses of his blasphemy (6:11-15).

4. **The Hearing Before the Sanhedrin:** In the longest recorded message in Acts we read Stephen’s answer — not a legal defense of himself but a history lesson in order to vindicate Christianity with 3 main ideas:

- **He shows progress and change in God’s program** (e.g., God started focusing on Abraham, the journey of Joseph to Egypt, deliverance from Egypt under Moses, building tabernacle and later the temple)
- **God’s blessings were not limited to the land of Israel or the Temple** (e.g., the patriarchs and leaders were blessed outside the the land, Moses had sons in Midian, the Law given in the wilderness, the tabernacle built in the wilderness, the temple was not God’s dwelling place)
- **Israel had a long history of opposing God’s plans and His servants and was still doing so** (e.g., Abraham tarried in Haran, Joseph sold by his brothers, the Israelites initially rejected Moses, Israel turned to idolatry, Israel misunderstood the purpose of the temple)

5. **Moses:** We do well to compare Stephen’s details about Moses to information we have in the OT and in Hebrews 11.

- Did Moses have a speech impediment? (See Acts 7:22)
- Stephen said Moses was “beautiful” (7:20) and Hebrews 11:23 says his parents hid him for 3 months because he was “beautiful.” Would they not have saved an ugly baby?

6. This episode introduces Saul (later Paul). (7:58, 8:1)