*DEVOTIONAL*

January 1 - 6

*Stephen’s Witness*

**Monday, January 1 Acts 6:1-7**

*“Rumblings of discontent”*

 The Jerusalem church faced a serious problem with unity because of its multicultural composition. The solution to the problem facing the church was not to divide and have separate churches – one for those whose first language was Greek and another for those who primarily spoke Hebrew. Rather, they sought to ensure that everyone was well cared for.

 Since this was a problem relating to a practice that affected the whole church, the entire group was involved in the solution. The principles were presented by the leaders (vv. 2-4), but their implementation involved the congregation who did the choosing (v. 5). Some, if not all, of those chosen for the distribution of food were Grecians. There is much wisdom here, for they would know the needs of their own people best.

 Three criteria were important in the selection of officers to administer the distribution of food. They had to have a good reputation, to be filled with wisdom, and to be filled with the Spirit. Stephen, who will be the focus of the rest of this chapter and the next, was one of the seven.

*Give us wisdom, Lord, to address problems of disunity in your church. Amen.*

**Tuesday, January 2 Acts 6:8-15**

*“Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power”*

 Stephen was an outstanding person and Luke (the author of Acts) mentions three features of his character. (1) *He was a man full of faith*. He was willing to trust Christ, to take him at this word and to risk all for Christ’s sake. (2) *He was full of the Holy Spirit*. While all believers have the Spirit within them, the work of the Spirit through Stephen was especially apparent to his fellow believers. (3) *He was a man full of God’s grace*. Stephen had let God’s grace impact him so much that it had made him a gracious person.

 Stephen was also an outstanding preacher and his opponents could not refute his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. This was in keeping with the promise of Christ: “For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Luke 21:15). Having failed to silence Stephen through debate, the Jews tried to silence him through the law. They persuaded certain people to make accusations against him, which allowed them to take him before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council).

*Fill us with your grace and power, Lord, that we may be your witnesses. Amen.*

**Wednesday, January 3 Acts 7:1-19**

*“This was Stephen’s reply”*

 We wonder about the approach Stephen took when he was given the opportunity to speak. It would appear that he took an inordinately long time recounting the history of Israel and telling at great length about personalities of the Old Testament about whom these Jewish leaders had heard thousands of times since they were old enough to understand. But had they understood? Did they have any idea of the deeper meaning, the purpose, the fulfillment, and the culmination in the Messiah? Stephen took full advantage of being able to speak to the leaders of his nation, and he did all he could through the power of the Spirit to bring them to God.

 Stephen was also doing something else. The Sanhedrin was obviously agitated and filled with anger. How could he sway them except to calm them down with what they had in common? He also wanted to establish his credentials as a faithful Hebrew scholar who knew his faith. Further, he wanted to show the faithfulness and goodness of God all through Israel’s history, leading up to the gracious and forgiving gift of his Son.

*The Scriptures, Lord, are the basis for our witness of you. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONAL*

January 1 - 6

*Stephen’s Witness*

**Thursday, January 4 Acts 7:20-45**

*“Our ancestors . . .”*

 Stephen’s source and authority were the Scriptures. What he said sprang from the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. While what he was saying was revolutionary, it was not new. He did not create new truth; he discovered truth already taught explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures and the teachings of Christ. If we approach the Bible with an open mind, we will find that it will give us truth to speak to our fallen world. Given our limitations, we will always fall short of fully understanding the truth of the Bible. But, guided by the Holy Spirit, we will discover fresh truth if we are open to learning from Scripture.

 There is little about Jesus and a lot about Moses in Stephen’s speech. This is understandable since the charge against Stephen was about his rejection of Moses’ teachings. Still, when Stephen pointed to one of the significant things that Moses said to the Israelites - “God will send you a prophet like me from your own people” – he was revealing to his audience that the prophet Moses had spoken of Jesus, the Messiah.

*Teach me your Word, Lord, that I may share it with others. Amen.*

**Friday, January 5 Acts 7:46-53**

*“You stubborn people!”*

 Stephen’s speech moves to its climax as he confronts the Sanhedrin with their unbelief. He speaks of the direct correlation between the sins of the people in the wilderness and the resistance of the leaders to whom he was speaking. He shifts tenses from the past to the present and changes pronouns from “they” and “them” to “you.” He exposes the false worship of the temple for God does not dwell in temples made with hands. Then he makes his direct confrontation: These leaders of Israel are like their fathers of old.

 They have persecuted the prophets and killed any who foretold the coming of the Righteous One. And they have betrayed and murdered Jesus, the promised Messiah. They are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, terms from the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that are frequently used throughout the Old Testament to speak of those who reject God’s revealed truth. There can be no forgiveness without acknowledgement of sins. They must humble themselves and confess their murder of Jesus. No wonder they cried out and gnashed their teeth.

*Your truth, Lord, includes the reality of judgment for sin. Amen.*

**Saturday, January 6 Acts 7:54 – 8:3**

 *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”*

 The death of Stephen raises profound questions. What was the Lord doing? How could he allow this to happen to one as faithful as Stephen? Why didn’t he stop it? Stephen was at the height of his effectiveness as a witness for Christ. Why allow so bright a flame to be extinguished? We’ve all asked such questions about tragedies.

 These questions about Stephen can find at least a partial answer by reflecting on the history of the early church. Through Stephen’s death many Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem. They were scattered, and their faith with them. They were to be part of the worldwide missionary movement. They would never have left Jerusalem without the persecution and punishment inflicted on them. The death of Stephen ignited the fire of the pent-up hatred for the followers of Jesus. They had to leave. And their resettlement throughout the cities of the Roman world eventually bear fruit in the establishment of Christian churches. The blood of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was a seed that spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*You work all things together for good, Lord, according to your purpose. Amen.*