

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse Study Notes

Acts 6:8-15

Luke's historical outline: Acts 1-5: The formation of the Church in Jerusalem – and three of the challenges that it faced, both from without and within. Acts 6: Luke lays the foundation for the history of the evangelization of the Gentiles.

Luke will demonstrate this new global outreach by showing us the impact of four men: Stephen, Philip, Cornelius, and Saul/Paul.

- **Stephen's Story:** Acts 6:8–8:2. His presentation of the Gospel will invoke a virulent response from the Jewish Sanhedrin – resulting in his martyrdom.
- **Philip's Story:** Acts 8:4–40. Philip will have two significant impacts on the Acts narrative. He will be the first person to share the Gospel with the Samaritans, as well as leading the first African to Christ.
- **Saul of Tarsus' Salvation:** Acts 9:1-31. Saul's story is a very natural prelude to the fullest outreach of the Church into the predominantly Gentile world.
- **Cornelius:** Acts 10:1–11:18. Cornelius will be the first Gentile convert to be fully accepted by the Church. The “Gentile-Pentecost” that accompanies his salvation and water baptism will be the linchpin for the Apostles' grasp of God's intention to include the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God.
- **Stephen - The Preamble: vv. 8-9**

“Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed

great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.”

Luke’s description of Stephen’s role in the Church. 1. Before: A man filled with the Spirit and wisdom. 2. Now: “A man full of God’s grace and power, [who] performed great wonders and signs among the people.”

While these wonders and signs attracted many to Stephen, they also attracted the jealousy and hatred from the Church’s opponents, including the members of the Freedman Synagogue, and later, the Sadducees sitting on the Jewish High Council.

- **Stephen’s Opponents:** v. 9

“Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.”

Luke doesn’t tell us why such a fierce opposition arose these two groups, but we can make some educated guesses: 1. Jealousy over the honor the crowds were showing Stephen. 2. The preaching of Christ’s Resurrection.

- **Background Information:**

The “Freedmen” were both freed slaves and their descendants. The Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia are harder to identify. F.F. Bruce points out, “... Some think that they composed four distinct synagogues, with the freedmen making a fifth.” It may also be that there were two, three, or four synagogues.

First Century Synagogues in Jerusalem: Some were attended exclusively by Hellenistic Jews. The “Freedmen Synagogue” may have been founded by Theodotus sometime before 70 A.D.

The “Freedmen” consisted of former slaves, or the children of former slaves, who had been emancipated by their owners. Example: Many Jews who were taken captive to Rome at the time of Pompey’s conquest of Judaea in 63 B.C. were later emancipated and given the status of freedmen.

- **The Debate:**

As many historians point out, a formal debate was probably slated between Stephen and his “opponents”. The primary question: “Was Jesus the long-awaited Messiah?” Verse 10: “But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”

The Spirit of God in Stephen’s Role: 1. He was a man filled with the Spirit’s wisdom. 2. He was a man empowered by the Spirit. 3. He had such wisdom from the Spirit, they could not prevail against him in a debate on the Messiahship of Christ.

- **Switching Tactics: vv. 11-12**

“Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.”

1. Stephen’s opponents chose the kind of charges against him that they knew would incite the greatest anger among the members of the Sanhedrin.

2. Stephen’s defense left no doubt that Christ had superseded both the Law of Moses and the Temple sacrifices.

- **Employing False Witnesses: vv.13-14:**

“There they set up false witnesses, who said, “This man never ceases speaking out against the holy place and the law; we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

These accusations went right to the heart of Judaism: The Law of

Moses and the Temple. In addition, they were purposefully exaggerated: "This man never ceases speaking out against the holy place and the Law of Moses."

- **About Blasphemy:**

Strictly speaking, blasphemy was defined as any profane utterance of the unspoken Name of God. Beyond that, God's name was never to verbalized in public or private discourse. The only exception was the High Priest's use of God's Name connected to the activities on the Day of Atonement.

Stephen's trial demonstrates a much broader definition of blasphemy. During Jesus' trial before the high priest, he was also accused of blasphemy. See: Mark 14:61-64

Stephen was accused of blasphemy because he used very similar language to Jesus' insistence, "Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up on the third day." – John 2:19

Statements against the Temple were considered very dangerous for a couple of reasons:

1. The Temple was the center of the Jewish faith and political power.
2. The Temple was a huge source of income for the Jewish people.

F.F. Bruce: "Any threat, real or imagined ... was also a threat to their livelihood. The economic life of the city and its residents depended on the temple."

Had the false witnesses completely lied? Not really. Jesus had challenged the religious leaders about the corrupt practices they employed. He had talked about destroying the Temple – even though he really meant his own body.

Stephen used similar language, pointing to the fact that Christ's death and resurrection meant the end of the Temple sacrifices.

Jesus had gone a step further. Mark chapter 13: “As Jesus was leaving the Temple that day, one of his disciples said, “Teacher, look at these magnificent buildings! Look at the impressive stones in the walls.” Jesus replied, “Yes, look at these great buildings. But they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!”

Stephen clearly aligned himself with Jesus' teachings about the Temple being superseded by faith in Christ as the Messiah. He had taken a step further by insisting the Temple law and sacrifices would be abolished.

- **A Face Like An Angel: v. 15**

“At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.”

The members of the Sanhedrin are staring at Stephen because something supernatural is happening. Now, remember, the Sadducees don't believe in the supernatural – but that isn't keeping it from happening.

Luke is underlining the event for us: Any Jew versed in the Old Testament would immediately know what Luke is describing. Centuries before, when Moses came out of Mt. Sinai with a copy of the Law, his face had shone brightly.

“When Moses came down Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, he wasn't aware that his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the LORD. So when Aaron and the people of Israel saw the radiance of Moses' face, they were afraid to come near him.” Exodus 34:29-30

Moses had spent 40 days in God's presence, unaware of the fact that, as he did, that presence was transforming him. It was permeating his very flesh. That's what Luke is pointing to. Stephen's face is shining, just as Moses' face did at Mt. Sinai.

What did it all mean? The Holy Spirit was indicating that, like Moses,

Stephen had God's approval. He was a man full of the Spirit of God and wisdom. He was a man who experienced the Spirit's power in a ministry that included healing. He was a man with irresistible wisdom and now his face glowed like an angel.

- **Next time:** We will look at Stephen's Defense.