



"REASONS TO REJOICE"

"Your Words were found and I ate them, and Your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." Jeremiah 15:16

"RIDING THROUGH" THE BOOK OF ACTS - LESSON 6

We ended our lesson last week with the apostles rejoicing because they were counted worthy to suffer shame in the name of Jesus. They continued to teach daily in the temple and in every house (Acts 5:42).

The early church was not only being added to, it was being multiplied (Acts 6:1)! With the growing number of believers, the needs of the church also grew. As always, with more people come more problems. The apostles are faced with the accusation of discrimination within the church. How do they handle it? Let's see ...

First Day

1. Read Acts 6:1-15. List any questions, comments, or thoughts you have.

2. Read Acts 6:1-7 again. What does the text say? Answer the following questions:
 - a. What problem was presented to the apostles?
 - b. Who was doing the murmuring?
 - c. How did the apostles deal with the problem?
 - d. What was the result?

Satan had already tried to corrupt the church through the hypocrisy of Annanias and Sapphira, then through the persecution in Acts 5:17-42. Neither strategy stopped the church from growing, so now he tried to distract the leaders from what they were called to do.

The word "**Hellenist**" in verse 1 means a "Grecian" or "Greek-speaking" Jew. The Hebrew Jews that dwelt in Palestine (largely in Jerusalem) spoke Hebrew and Aramaic and followed the traditions and customs of the Hebrews. The Hellenist Jews were from other parts of the Roman world. They still worshipped Jehovah and followed the same traditions, but they spoke Greek and had been influenced by the Greek culture, style of dress, and philosophy of life. The Hebrews often looked down on the Grecian believers as "second-class" Jews.

William Barclay helps us better understand the distribution of food to the widows ... "In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went around the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy, partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. In addition to this, house-to-house collection was made daily for those in pressing need." Perhaps the early church had taken over this custom.

Discrimination in the church can be found in other areas besides racial prejudice.

3. What other types of discrimination can be found within a church?

4. The apostles handled this accusation with wisdom. What could have been the result in the church if the problem continued?

The text never says if the discrimination was real or supposed. Often times we can feel discriminated against because of our own insecurities, fears, or preconceived ideas.

5. Is there any way that you feel you are discriminated against in your church, family, or workplace? How? What should you do about it?

The word "**desirable**" in verse 2 means "**fit**" or "**pleasing**."

6. Why did the apostles want to choose others to serve tables rather than do it themselves? Did they think they were "too good" to do it?

7. What was supposed to be their priority? (vs 4)

As a result of this problem, the first deacons were chosen. The word deacon is not in this text, but it is later used in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The word "deacon" comes from the Greek word "diakoneo" which means "to serve." There are a few variations of this word in verses 1 and 2.

8. How many "deacons" did they choose? (vs 3)

9. What were they supposed to look for in these men? (vs 3)

10. Why was the choosing of deacons such a wise decision?

These servants, or deacons, made it possible for the apostles to carry on the ministry of prayer and teaching God's Word to the people. Their ministry would be to meet the physical needs of the church. The ministry of the deacons was not below that of the apostles, but they complimented each other and allowed the apostles to do the work God had called them to do.

11. If the deacons were only going to serve tables, why was it important for them to be full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and of good reputation?

12. What does it mean to be of "good reputation"?

This ends our lesson for today. Tomorrow we'll meet our seven servants in Acts 6, including our beloved Stephen, who became the first martyr of the early church.

Memory Verse of the Week: "... but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." Acts 6:4

Second Day

Review this week's memory verse.

1. Read Acts 6:1-8 again.

In the book of 1 Timothy, Paul writes to a young pastor named Timothy who faced heavy burdens and responsibilities as the overseer in the church of Ephesus. Paul gives Timothy some qualifications that must be met before choosing a man as a deacon.

2. Read 1 Timothy 3:8-13. What are the qualifications for a deacon? What about their wives?

Elders are also called "bishops" or "overseers." They oversee the spiritual needs of the church body (teaching, etc.). Pastors are also considered elders in the church. The qualifications of an elder are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Even though the apostles told the people what to look for in a deacon in Acts 6:3, I believe that every Christian should desire these same characteristics in his own life.

3. Are you of good reputation in your church? In your community? In your family? Do you leave a lot of dirt behind you wherever you go or situations that aren't dealt with? What can you do to change that?
4. Are you full of wisdom? How do we obtain wisdom? Read James 1:5. How are we supposed to ask for it? Read James 1:6 and 4:3. Whose wisdom do you seek?
5. Again we ask you ... are you full of the Holy Spirit? Have you been baptized by the Holy Spirit and do you ask daily to be filled? (Ephesians 5:18) Are you allowing Him to control your life?

6. Why was it so important for the apostles to be continually in the Word and prayer? What could happen in the church if they neglected this?
7. Is that the priority of your pastor? Does your pastor place the highest importance on the ministry of the Word of God and prayer?

Ministers often feel overwhelmed with trying to meet all the needs of their church congregation. They feel responsible for so many things. Their first priority has to be prayer and the Word of God. It's vital for the church body that he keeps these priorities right. His job is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and the edifying of the body (Ephesians 4:11-12). Paul told Timothy in **1 Timothy 4:16** to "take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, and in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you."

If the pastor neglects the Word and prayer and is distracted by other things, the church will die spiritually. It's God's Word that strengthens us, edifies us, corrects us, and instructs us in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). The body should never pressure the pastor into doing other "good" things if he does not feel called to them. Gene Getz, in his book Sharpening the Focus of the Church said, "God never intended for the members of the body of Christ to become dependent on one leader to do all the work of the ministry. God did not even intend for several leaders to do the work of the ministry. Rather, He intended for the whole church to do this work. It is a responsibility of church leaders to equip the saints to serve!"

Why does Scripture place such a high demand on pastor-teachers? Richard Baxter, a noted English Puritan wrote about the demands of a pastor. He said, "A pastor's temptations are greater than those of most men, for the devil makes his sharpest attacks on him. The pastor's sins are more aggravated than most men, because they have more hypocrisy in them and the honor of Jesus and His truth is more at stake in pastors than most men. The souls of the body of Christ are dependent upon a pastor's self-examination." (Perhaps this is why it is said that an average stay of a pastor at a church is three years.)

8. What kinds of pressures can a church or an individual place on a pastor? What do you expect from your pastor?
9. Moses came up against the same problem. Read Exodus 18:11-27. What was the problem, who counseled him, and what was the counsel? Did it work?

10. Name the seven deacons that were chosen. (vs 5)

11. What did the apostles do before they laid hands on them? (vs 6)

It's interesting to note that all seven men that were chosen had Greek names, including Nicolas, who was a Gentile that became a Jew. Remember it was the Greek-speaking Jews who were doing the murmuring. They could no longer complain of discrimination and were now ensured a fair distribution of food to the Hellenist widows.

Of the seven men, we meet Stephen, whom we will look at more closely tomorrow. We recognize Philip, who later became known as one of the first evangelists. We will read more about him in Acts 8. Church history tells us that Prochorus became secretary of the apostle John, then bishop of Nicodema, and was eventually martyred. Nothing is known about the remaining men (except that Timon starred in the Walt Disney movie Lion King!).

12. Satan tried to distract the apostles from what God wanted them to do. What kinds of things does Satan use today to distract Christians?

13. Are you being distracted by anything or anyone? What is it that God has called you to at this time in your life? What's fighting for your attention? Honestly search your heart on this one. Be prepared for God to show you.

14. Can you honestly say that you have given yourself over to prayer? Have you been diligent to the ministry of the Word? What do you need to change?

These are great questions to meditate on the rest of today. God's Word and prayer are so important to every Christian, not only to the pastor. His Word will give us a "**Reason to Rejoice**" every day if we're looking for one! **What was yours today?**

Third Day

Review your memory verse. Practice living it out today!

Today we meet Stephen. His name comes from the Greek word "**stephanos**" which means a victor's crown. In Greek culture, garland or chaplet is given as a prize for victory, as a festal ornament, or as a public honor for distinguished service or personal worth. (*A Manuel Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, G. Abbott-Smith.) By the end of our lesson we will see how Stephen truly was deserving of a crown for his faithfulness and courage.

1. Read Acts 6:8-15.
2. How is Stephen described in Acts 6:5 and 8?
3. In your own words, explain the situation leading to Stephen's arrest.

Because the chief meeting place was still the temple court, the evidence of growth must have been a daily source of frustration to the high priest and his friends.

4. Who was arguing with Stephen, and why were they so upset? (vs 9-10)

The people in the Synagogue of the Freedmen (vs 9) were also referred to as the "Libertines." It consisted of Jews from foreign countries who were once slaves of Rome. They were now set free and settled in Jerusalem.

The Jews congregated in the synagogues to hear Scripture read and expounded upon. When Stephen spoke, he handled the Scriptures so beautifully that the cleverest Jewish apologist couldn't defeat him.

5. How does the way these people treated Stephen compare to how Jesus was treated? Read Matthew 26:59-62 and John 2:19-22.
6. What was Stephen being accused of?

7. Have you ever been falsely accused? Compare your response to Stephen's.

8. How was Stephen's response like Christ's? Read Acts 8:32-33 and Isaiah 53:7-8.

9. David was also slandered. What did he do? Read Psalm 109:2-4.

They accused Stephen of saying that Jesus would destroy their temple and change the customs that Moses had given them. Remember that in context, Jesus was referring to the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

Acts 6:15 says that Stephen's face was as the face of an angel. They could tell he was a servant of God just by his appearance. Exodus 34:30 says that Moses' face shone after he had been with the Lord. It's interesting that they were accusing Stephen of opposing Moses, but Stephen was more like Moses than they were.

10. How could Stephen have this kind of peace under pressure? How can you have it too? Read Philippians 4:6-7.

C.H. Spurgeon, addressing his students concerning ministry said, "Men, when you teach on Heaven, let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a grin on your lips. When you teach on hell, your normal face will do fine!"

"As false accusations, lies, and anger preceded the rocks that would soon follow, Stephen's face reflected not hatred, not horror...but Heaven."

(John Courson)

Meditate on Psalm 29:11 ... **"The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace."** He really is the God of Peace. Rejoice!!

Fourth Day

Review your memory verse.

Stephen was accused of ridiculing the temple and the law. In a speech that covers 53 verses, Stephen refutes this accusation, speaking very highly of the very God he supposedly blasphemed. He emphasized God's relationship with Jesus, beginning in Genesis and ending with the prophets. He was attempting to prove to them that the temple wasn't necessary. The Jews believed that the temple was a permanent institution.

Stephen's message was logical and powerful. It's the longest sermon in the book of Acts. This week we will look at the first half of chapter 7.

1. Read Acts 7:1-19. Reread Acts 7:1-8.
2. What title does Stephen give to God in Acts 7:2?
3. What phrase is used repeatedly in this chapter? (Acts 7: 2, 12, 15, 19, 38, 39, 44, 45)
4. Why do you think Stephen uses this phrase?

Stephen begins his review where the life of faith begins for the Jew. Abraham's life became a pilgrimage, heading straight for Heaven. He owned nothing, except for the promises from God.

5. Let's review Abraham. Read Hebrews 11:8-19. Answer the following questions:

a. How was he a man of faith? (vs 8)

b. How was he a man of hope? (vs 13-16)

6. Abraham believed God's promises. What did He promise him? (Acts 7:5)

From Hebrews 11:13, there are four things that Abraham did with the promises of God ...

1. He saw them.
2. He was assured of them.

- 3. He embraced them.
- 4. He confessed them.

- 7. Can you **see** His promises to you? Are you looking for them in His Word?
- 8. Are you **assured** of His promises? Do you believe them by faith?
- 9. Have you **embraced** (welcomed) God's promises in your life? Abraham didn't just believe them, he embraced them. He let God's promises change his heart. Is **YOUR** heart being changed by God's Promises?
- 10. Abraham **confessed** them. The confession made His promises a reality in their lives. He openly confessed his faith. Are you openly confessing your faith?

Abraham knew he was Heaven-bound. He knew where his real home was. He considered himself only "passin' through" and his life reflected the hope he had in God.

- 11. Are you assured of your place in Heaven? Are you sure that your name is written in the Book of Life? Are you getting "ready for forever"?
- 12. Fill in this blank. If I die tonight, I would go to _____.
- 13. If you're not sure, read John 5:24 and 1 John 5:11-13. Ask Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, to come into your heart and forgive you of your sins. Then you can be assured of your place in Heaven with Him.

Stephen reminds them that it's not healthy to cling to the past. He also reminds them that the place of worship isn't important, it's who you're worshipping.

- 14. Last question for today. How does this story about the faith of Abraham encourage you today?

Fifth Day

Write out your memory verse.

Now Stephen uses the life of Joseph to show the council how the Jewish people had always resisted God's plan for them.

1. Read Acts 7:1-18. Reread Acts 7:9-18. The patriarchs were the 12 brothers of Joseph and the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel.
2. Why were Joseph's brothers envious? (Genesis 37:3-5)
3. Joseph's life was full of trials. Can you remember any to share with the group?
4. The key to Joseph's life is summed up in Genesis 50:20. Read and explain what it means in your own words. How was he a testimony of this verse?
5. Read Romans 8:28 and Jeremiah 29:11. How do these compare with Genesis 50:20?
6. How do these verses give you hope in your situation?
7. David was afraid when the Philistines captured him in Gath. It was at that time he wrote Psalm 56. Read this Psalm and pick out some phrases that speak to your heart.

8. Joseph is a great picture of Jesus Christ. Please answer the questions below:

- a. Joseph was envied by his brothers. Who envied Jesus?
Read Matthew 27:17-18.

- b. Joseph was sold for 20 pieces of silver (Genesis 37:28). How much was Jesus sold for? Read Matthew 26:14-16.

- c. Joseph was punished for sins he didn't commit. What was Jesus punished for? Read John 3:16 and Isaiah 53:4-5.

- d. Joseph forgave his family for all the evil that had been done to him (Genesis 50:15-21). Who does Jesus forgive? Read 1 John 1:9.

In Acts 7:13-16, both Jacob and Joseph insisted that they be buried in Canaan, the Promised Land (Genesis 50:25, Exodus 13:19). This tomb was the only piece of land that Abraham had purchased (Genesis 23). They both knew that all of God's promises to His people were to be fulfilled in Canaan, and that's where they wanted to remain.

Stephen showed the council how Israel rejected Joseph, the first of many saviors sent to them by God. He knew that they would continue to reject the Messiah.

Stephen was making a great case! God was definitely anointing him to preach. He is a great example of obedience and trust. Next week we will examine the rest of his message in chapter 7 and his death. I am encouraged by the boldness of Stephen. I am humbled by his death ... I am convicted by his life.

9. Can you share one thought from this week's lesson that ministered to your heart in a special way?