

The Persecution Begins

The apostles continued their established practice of teaching. *"Every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ"* (Acts 5:42). The generosity of those early converts is legendary, but as their numbers increased, a problem arose with the daily distribution to the needy (Acts 6:1-2). The apostles needed help. Many people claim that the chosen seven (Acts 6:3-4), were the first deacons. But their jobs were limited to "serve tables." As soon as the scattering started, we find one of them preaching in Jerusalem. Later, another is evangelizing and performing signs beyond Jerusalem. The offices of elder and deacon were not needed then since the Holy Spirit worked through the apostles in Jerusalem.

One of the seven, "Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). Some of those from other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean area confronted him and argued with him, *"But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking"* (Acts 6:10). *"Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.' And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council"* (Acts 6:11-12).

The charges brought against Stephen included: The Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy the temple and change the customs handed down by Moses (Acts 6:13-14). Since the Spirit leads the speaker to repeat what Jesus said, we can believe that Stephen taught what Jesus did to the woman at Jacob's well and the disciples. Jesus said, *"neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:21-24). Jesus said about the Temple, *"Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down"* (Matthew 24:1-2). But the accusers left out part of Jesus' teaching. What Jesus said was, *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished"* (Matthew 5:17-18). Stephen's defense is a lesson on the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (Acts 7:2-53).

Stephen reminded them of how Israelites rejected Moses as their protector and defender (Acts 7:25-28). But God sent him back with mighty workings of the Holy Spirit to free Israel and give them The Law (Acts 7:35). These Jews had rejected Jesus the Messiah, but God raised Him and now sends His messengers with the power of the Holy Spirit. They were received instructions to build first a tabernacle (Acts 7:44), to worship God, but the people had been *"unwilling to be obedient to him."* They worshiped many things and *"made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands."* God said. *"It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, o house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon"* (Acts 7:39-43).

About God's temple, Stephen pointed out that *"it was Solomon who built a house for Him"* (Acts 7:47). Stephen reminded them that Solomon also said, *"However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands"* (Acts 7:48-50). The words of Solomon and the prophets had been to "worship God and not the building." A lesson the Jews needed to learn as well as many people today.

Stephen's final charge caused the Jews to lose control and execute an accused person, which they knew they should not do (John 18:31). *"You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it"* (Acts 7:51-53).

The contrast between Stephen, changed by the word into a faithful follower of Christ, and the Sanhedrin, filled with their self-righteousness, is remarkable. Stephen looking to Jesus and the Jews, filled with anger and fury, to have their faults pointed out. And so, they stoned to death a righteous man who, in the end, prayed for them (Acts 7:54-60). Other followers, devout men, buried Stephen (Acts 8:2).

But a young man, Saul of Tarsus, who would later be known by his Greek name Paul, agreed to the stoning. *"And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles"* (Acts 8:1). *(But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison"* (Acts 8:1-3).