



The Man with the Face of an Angel! Acts 6:1-7:1 (Lesson #10)

To access missed lessons, lesson guides, and additional materials please visit our class website:
<https://truth-seekers.net>

OUTLINE of Acts Chapter 6:1-15

- 1) Dissension arises in the church about how the Hellenist widows were being treated compared to the Hebrew widows (6:1)
- 2) The twelve summoned the congregation together and directed them to select seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom who the apostles would set over this matter (6:2-4).
- 3) The congregation chose seven and set them before the apostles who laid hands on them (6:5-6).
- 4) The word of God continued spreading as wonders and signs were being done among the people and a great number of priests became saved (6:7).
- 5) Luke picks up one of the early deacons (Stephen) and discusses how God was using him, even doing wonders and signs through him (6:8).
- 6) A number of Hellenistic Jews from different synagogues debated with Stephen, but could not overthrow the things Stephen was saying (6:9-10).
- 7) They secretly hired men to lie about what Stephen was saying (6:11).
- 8) Further they stirred up elders and scribes and had Stephen brought before the Sanhedrin (6:12).
- 9) These men put forth false witnesses making two major claims; this man is speaking against the law of Moses, and he is saying that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs (6:13-14).
- 10) After leveling the charges, the High Priest provides Stephen the opportunity to provide a defense (6:15-7:1).

“1 ¶ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Vs 1 - This would be yet **another progress report**, this is the **sixth** if you are keeping track.

Here pretty basic, but it hits the important point: In these days, the days **following the second persecution**, contrary to what we might expect, the disciples continued to increase in number, we have no idea of the count now, other than the apostles are boldly proclaiming Jesus and God is continuing to manifest both healing and miracles through the apostles and their immediate associates.

John MacArthur in his commentary estimates that the number of disciples had likely passed **20,000 in Jerusalem!**

Notice during this time the number of disciples were increasing. The Greek word translated disciple is **μαθητής (mathetes)**. It means learner, pupil, student, or disciple. In the **Synoptic gospels** this word is used **157 times**. In the **Gospel of John** this word is used **78 times**. In **Acts** this word is used **28 times**.

However, it is **not used** a single time in the **Epistles** or the **Revelation**.

In the Epistles and the Revelation the terms **saints (used 224 times)** and **brethren (used even more)** became the common, predominant names for believers. So, you know, brethren is also used a lot in Acts.

This is interesting, but never forget, we, like the early church are disciples, we are **learners**, and we are also **saints**, and **brethren**.

During these times of continued growth, a **complaint** by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.

The Greek word here translated “complaint” is **γογγυσμός (goggusmos)**, it means to **murmur** or to **mutter**. It is not an **open complaint**, but a **smoldering discontentment**.

There is this **smoldering discontentment** that is happening in the early church during this time of rapid and unprecedented growth!

So Satan had **tried persecution** (by the way he is not done with that one), but that had merely caused the church to grow faster. He had tried to **cripple the church by bringing in sin** from professing believers, God stepped in, brought temporal judgment, and the church continued to rapidly grow. Satan takes a new **third approach; he tries to create dissension and division**.

APPLICATION: It is I hope refreshing to see that just as we sometimes run into problems or challenges, so too the early church.

Here is what we read: ***a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.***

Pause, what is a Hellenist? At this time in History, basically all professing Jews could be divided into two different groups. The Hellenist Jews and the Hebrew Jews.

The Hellenistic Jews, the group here lodging the complaint, spoke Greek, and likely more closely aligned with the Greek culture, and many lived in various places all over the Roman empire. They were Jews, but more than likely they read the Septuagint over the Hebrew Bible.

Hebrew Jews were those Jews, who for the most part had lived in Israel, they spoke Hebrew and/or Aramaic and they followed Jewish or Hebrew customs and culture. Most did not speak Greek and did not read the Septuagint. These are Hebrew speaking Jews who reside in Jerusalem and surrounding cities.

As you might imagine, the Hebrews saw the **Hellenists as compromisers**. While The Hellenists saw the Hebrews as old fuddy-duddies, unwilling to change with the times.

We can imagine that some of the Hellenistic Jews had come to Jerusalem for the Passover, believed on the Lord Jesus and decided to stay to place themselves under the apostles teaching. But there were likely others who had somewhere along the line, moved from their native country back to Israel.

Bottom line, they are likely a **minority in the early church** which helps explain how that might be overlooked! A complaint arises between the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrews.

We have every reason to believe, although it may have not been on purpose, it was likely a **legitimate complaint**.

Now to the substance of the complaint: The Hellenist, Jews and Jewish proselytes, who spoke Greek complained that ***their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution***, likely of food and possibly even money.

Although we did not know it until now, the **early church** is also taking care of widows and **distributing food and possibly money** to them. This is yet another example of the early church taking care of its own.

It is possible, that this **work too was being overseen** by the apostles whose workload is getting quite unmanageable, and it erupts into a claim of discrimination.

This threatens to destroy the unity in the early church! So, a complaint is forming, this is a different kind of internal challenge, but one that must be addressed.

The Hebrews were giving commands in reference to caring for widows two examples include (Deut 14:29; Deut 24:19-21). The church has taken up the responsibility of caring for believing widows.

Here though, something has gone wrong, and the church was caring for widows, **but the Hellenistic widows seem to be neglected.**

Vs 2 - Then twelve took account of what was happening, the daily distribution was **not being handled properly, widows were being neglected**, it was **reflecting negatively on the church**, and it had the **potential to undermine the unity** of the early church. They saw this as a **serious issue** that required **immediate attention.**

Then the 12, the apostles acted! The twelve summoned the full number of the disciples together.

Scholars are not sure who the **“full number”** Luke is referring to. Is he referring to all the followers of Jesus at this time or is he referring to the original 120, or some other subset of the massive number of disciples, scholars are not sure. But the apostles summon the **full number of disciples** (the first business meeting) and say to them: *“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*

So, you see it. The word translated serve is the verb **διακονέω (diakoneo)**, means to **serve**. It comes from the root word where we get our English word **Deacon.**

Too many jobs are resulting in poor performance in one or more of those jobs and the apostles rightly conclude **this is not our primary job and we need assistance.**

APPLICATION: When we take on too many jobs it can cause poor performance in multiple areas and worse, poor performance in the area God has called us to!

Vs 3-4 - The apostles come to a **recommendation, a solution** to the problem.

First, we see there was a **specific number** the apostles directed the early church to select, in this **case seven.**

Then we see **five qualifications** for this early group:

- 1) They **were to be men.** The Greek word is **άνήρ (aner)**.
- 2) These men were to **come from among them.**
- 3) They were to be men of **“good repute.”** They were to be men with a **good reputation**, they were to be men who people viewed as **trustworthy.**
- 4) They were to be **full πλήρης (pleres)** of the **Spirit.** They were to be men yielded and continuing to yield themselves to the Spirit!
- 5) They were to be **full πλήρης (pleres)** of **wisdom.** They were to possess biblical and theological knowledge and the practical wisdom to apply biblical truths to everyday situations.

As you think about these qualifications, it is clear the apostles were concerned with the **inward character** of these men and not **outward appearance** or **accomplishments.**

The apostles would **appoint these seven** to be in charge of the daily distribution. **The church body nominated; the apostles appointed** those who would **oversee this important work!**

But, we (the apostles say) will **devote ourselves to prayer** and to the **ministry of the word** (preaching and teaching). The apostles saw their primary roles as prayer and teaching/preaching.

APPLICATION: This is the expectation we should have for our Pastor.

We have seen the teaching/preaching throughout the book of Acts, here Peter says another major aspect for the apostles was prayer. We see this in the **life of Paul** (Rom 1:9; Eph 1:16; Phi 1:3-4; IThes 1:2).

The apostles saw their role as two-fold. Teaching and preaching and prayer.

So, you know. There is some disagreement between commentators if these are early deacons or something that was called together for a short time (transitional) and then disbanded.

Many believe it is **describing something** that would later be **codified** and **prescribed (I Tim 3)**! Others would say, it is describing something that was unique for that time.

I would tend to say this is **describing something** that the **Lord would make prescriptive** for the church **the second office in the church** namely that of **Deacons**.

5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Vs 5 - The **recommendation** that came from the apostles pleased the entire gathering. They likely saw this as a solution that made sense, that allowed the apostles to focus on the main thing for them (prayer, teaching and preaching) and opened an opportunity for men of **good report to serve the Lord** and to **serve the congregation**. This pleased the whole gathering!

Then we are told who they chose, the first seven men, to serve (possibly) as the first seven Deacons.

Now it is important to note that they are never called deacons, but their service sounds a lot like a deacon. Many believing this was the genesis, this was the start, of the office of a deacon.

Then we are told the names of the **seven** they chose: #1 Stephen, #2 Philip, #3 Prochorus, #4 Nicanor, #5 Timon, #6 Parmenas, and #7 Nicolaus.

Stephen - Luke writes that Stephen is a man **full πλήρης (pleres) of faith** and **full of the Holy Spirit!**

The book of Acts principally records the efforts of two apostles. Peter in the early Jerusalem church and Paul the missionary to the Gentiles. Luke will use Stephen as a bridge between these two.

Peter was instrumental in appointing him as one of the first deacons. Saul, who will later be renamed Paul was involved in his death!

Stephen is not just a man who is full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. As you will see in the coming weeks he had a profound knowledge of the Old Testament, he was bold in his witness, like a few other close associates of the apostles, God did wonders and miracles through him (Acts 6:8).

I see him as a **teaching/preaching deacon**. He is a hybrid. We will see he was a **fantastic historian** (Hebrew history) and an **awesome apologist**. Like Barnabas, **Stephen was a good man**.

His name means crowned (I will talk more about that in the coming weeks) and he is mentioned **seven times** in the Bible, all in the book of Acts. Most scholars believe he was a Hellenist. He was a Jew who spoke Greek. This also made him a **great candidate to serve**.

One more thing, so I do not bury the lead, he will become the first Christian martyr. The first one who will be killed because of his faith in the Messiah. You will see that in the coming weeks.

One more thing. Of the all the sermons recorded in the book of Acts, the longest recorded sermon is given by this deacon named Stephen.

Next is Philip – This is a different Philip than Philip the apostle. Like Stephen, Philip the Deacon was also a preacher/teacher even called an evangelist in (Acts 21:8). He was another hybrid, a servant and one who understood the Scriptures and was bold in his declaration of the Word.

In fact, as persecution intensified, we read this about Philip in (Acts 8:5-7). As with Stephen, **God did miracles through the hands of Philip.**

Next is Prochorus. He is only mentioned here in the entire New Testament. Tradition tells us that he died as a martyr at Antioch, but we cannot be sure.

Next is Nicanor. He too is only mentioned here in the New Testament.

Next is Timon. He too is only mentioned here in the New Testament.

Next is Parmenas. He too is only mentioned here in the New Testament.

Last is Nicolas. We had already been told that he was a proselyte of Antioch. So Nicolas **converted to Judaism** and he was from **Antioch.** He too is only mentioned here in the entire New Testament.

Five out of the seven slide into history with no additional commentary, but we will read more about **Stephen and Philip!**

All seven had one thing in common, they all had Greek names. Thus, it is likely that all of these seven men were Hellenistic Jews.

It seems the congregation and the apostles showed great concern about the Hellenistic widows and these initial appointments were all likely Hellenists.

We can imagine that the Hebrew believers were the predominant group, yet the people nominated a group out of the minority, the apostles appointed them and then laid hands on them.

ONE MORE POINT: This was quite practical work, but it was also spiritual work. This was quite practical work, and absolutely necessary for the needs of the body.

Vs 6 - So having been chosen by the believers, these seven were then placed before the apostles as the ones who were to fulfill the ministry of waiting on tables, in particular the daily distribution to the widows.

The apostles laid hands on them and prayer over them. This is the first occasion of the laying on of hands that we have in the entire New Testament.

It signified identification and affirmation of the church for the task that lay before them.

Vs 7 - An internal problem that could have **destroyed the unity** of the early church was met **head on by the church and then we read this.** Let's walk our way through the three things that Luke tells Theopolis:

- 1) The **word of God continued to increase**, it continued to grow, it continued to spread. The imperfect tense of the Greek verb highlights that the Word of God “kept increasing.”
- 2) The **number of disciples** (learners, pupils, students, disciples) **multiplied greatly.** It was not enough to say they multiplied, but the number **multiplied greatly!**
- 3) Then we read: **and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**

This is brand new! Now, we are seeing a “**great many**” priests become obedient to the faith.

We are now going to have a **formal introduction to Stephen.** We will spend the **next two lessons with Stephen,** but for now you will begin to get to know him a little better!

By the way, this is the **seventh progress report!**

8 ¶ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

Vs 8 - Having set the **appropriate background**. Having provided Theophilus with the **seventh progress report**, Luke now shifts his attention to **tell us about this deacon name Stephen**.

Now wait a minute. Wasn't this the guy chosen to do a non-spiritual task (serve tables) and now look how God is using him. Reminder, there are no non-spiritual tasks in the church, they are all spiritual. Equally, you never know where serving God will ultimately take you or how He will use you!

Here we go, we are told **three additional things** about Stephen, so we have every reason to believe that he was fulfilling his role in reference to the daily administration of the widows (whatever that looked like), but then Luke tells us three additional things about him.

FIRST – Stephen was **full of grace**. We saw this description with the apostles in Acts 4:33.

SECOND - Stephen was **full of power**, the Greek word being **δύναμις (dunamis)**. We have seen this power promised in (Acts 1:8 and operative in the apostles as recorded in Acts 4:33).

THIRD, we are told that Stephen **was doing great wonders and signs among the people**.

Stephen was not an apostle, he was not named among the 12, but we are told that wonders and signs were being done through his hands among the people.

Here we see great wonders and signs being done through the hands of one of the **first deacons**, who was a **direct associate of the apostles**.

Vs 9 - Opposition to Stephen and the person and work of Jesus who he was declaring arose from a **number of different synagogues**.

So you know: According to the Talmud, there were 480 different synagogues in Israel during the Second Temple period. Scholars disagree on exactly how many Luke is mentioning, but it is from 3-5.

FIRST, men from the **Synagogue of the freedmen**. These were likely Jews who had once been slaves of Rome and were now free.

SECOND, and some the synagogue of the **Cyrenians** (Jews from North Africa).

THIRD, and some of the synagogue of the **Alexandrians** (Jews from Egypt). This could have been the Synagogue of the freedmen which included Cyrenians and Alexandrians.

FOURTH, and some of the synagogues of Cilicia (Asia Minor), this included the city of Tarsus, the same region where Saul (AKA Paul) was from. I would suspect Saul is one of the ones debating with Stephen and getting very frustrated for he cannot overthrow what Stephen is saying.

Finally, there were those of the synagogues of Asia (other parts of Asia Minor).

When, where, or even how they came across Stephen, we do not know, but they began to dispute with Stephen. We can imagine they began to argue against what Stephen was proclaiming about Jesus.

They rose up and **disputed with him**. They **questioned**, they **argued**, they **presented their evidence in an attempt to overthrow** what Stephen was teaching.

By the way, disagreeing and presenting a counter opinion is fine. That is how we engage with non-believers.

Vs 10 – But, their arguments could not withstand the **wisdom** of Stephen. They could not **withstand the Spirit by which he spoke**.

The truth is being proclaimed by Stephen and they cannot withstand, they could not argue, they could not overthrow his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke.

Vs 11 - Unable to withstand the wisdom of his words, they **secretly instigated men** to lie about what he was saying.

The Greek word translated “Secretly instigated” means **to throw or put under**, it means to **induce or to privately instruct**. They likely induced these men with money. As best we understand men are **purchased to bear false witness against and about Stephen**.

They could not withstand the wisdom of his words, so they shifted the attack, they “**secretly**” instigated me to lie and say that they had heard Stephen say; “*blasphemous words against Moses and God.*”

It is interesting that the leading charge was that he spoke blasphemous things against Moses, and God too.

Vs 12 - They stirred up the people. The Greek word translated “**stirred up**” **συγκινέω (sugkineo)** is a **hapax legomenon**. It means to **throw into a commotion**.

They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes (lawyers) and then like what had happened with the 12 apostles they came and seized Stephen.

Then they brought him before the council, they brought him before the Sanhedrin.

*** It is not likely that the Sanhedrin were meeting at the moment they arrested him, so it is likely he was detained for some time until the Sanhedrin came together.

This is now the **third round of persecution**. With each round it has gotten more serious (that will be true of this third round as well).

This is the **first non-apostle** who has been brought before the Sanhedrin. This is the **first individual** who has been brought before the Sanhedrin. First it was **Peter and John**. Then it was the **twelve apostles**.

Can you imagine what this must have been like, **alone, surrounded by the 71 most powerful men** he would ever meet. Brought before them based on lies, based on **trumped up charges**.

Vs 13-14 - Let’s take an overview of the charges, and then we will slow down and walk through them:

- 1) This man never ceases to speak against this holy place (the temple). – LIE!
- 2) This man never ceases to speak against the law. LIE!
- 3) We have heard him say that Jesus is going to destroy this place. LIE!

- 4) We have heard him say that Jesus will change the customs that Moses delivered us. I suspect this too is a LIE.

But like all good lies, I suspect there is a hint of truth in every one of these claims. They are lies, but they, I believe contain a smidgeon of truth.

They had prepared false witnesses, like the Sanhedrin had done with Jesus, Stephen, this deacon is now facing false witnesses in a sham trial, allowed and even orchestrated by the leading spiritual and political body of Israel, the Sanhedrin!

Charges 1 and 3:

- 1) This man never ceases to speak against this holy place (the temple).
- 3) We have heard him say that Jesus is going to destroy this place.

The smidgeon of truth here may be that Stephen taught what Jesus said in Matthew 24 and Luke 19.

If Stephen had quoted what Jesus said, those who had been paid to bear false witness had taken it, twisted it and said that Stephen was preaching that Jesus said he would destroy this place and change the customs that Moses delivered.

Did not their own Hebrew Bible predict a time when the second temple would be destroyed? (Dan 9)

Charges 2 and 4:

- 2) This man never ceases to speak against the law.
- 4) We have heard him say that Jesus will change the customs that Moses delivered us. I cannot help but wonder if what Stephen was preaching went along this line: Brothers, we were given the law, but the law cannot save us, it can only condemn us when we break it. Therefore you must turn to Jesus the Christ, the only name under heaven whereby we must be saved.

Again, these things are lies, with a smidgens of truth.

A hint of what Stephen says in his defense to the Sanhedrin (Ac 7:51-53).

But it seems what they are claiming went beyond what Jesus taught, and they were maliciously lying about what Stephen was teaching.

These charges would have Sadducees, Pharisees, and Scribes are fired up! But the charge were made up!

Vs 15 - As the entire council look at him, as the entire council set their gaze upon him, Luke records that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's face began to glow with the **shekinah glory of God**. The visible manifestation of the glory of God began to show on Stephen's face. This reminds us of Moses (Ex 34:29-30) and even Jesus (Mt 17:2).

The false charges have been leveled against Stephen.

7:1 And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

To use modern vernacular: What do you have to say in your defense?

Although Stephen has nothing to say in his defense, he has a great deal to say to the Sanhedrin about Israel and what brought them to this point, and something to say about the Sanhedrin!

Here the charges have ended and Stephen has been provided the opportunity to defend himself.