

Acts 6:1-7 – The Word in Jerusalem

1. The short passage from 6:1-7 is the climax to the first main section of Acts – showing the amazing impact of the gospel message about Jesus in Jerusalem.

Read these verses to recap what has happened. What were the key factors in the rapid growth of the church?

Acts 1:8, 1:12-14, 2:1-4, 2:38-47, 4:1-4, 4:29-31, 5:25-32, 5:42 & 6:7.

Now read 6:1-6.

2. As the church grew an issue arose. The Christians from an “Hellenistic” background (ie. Greek speakers & culture) felt that their widows were not being cared for in the same way as the widows from an “Hebraic” background (ie. Hebrew speakers and culture). What indications are there in the passage that this was an important issue to be addressed?
3. How are those who were appointed to the task described? (Notice what else these men do – Stephen in 6:8-10 & Phillip in 8:4-8)
4. Why did the apostles appoint others to oversee the distribution of food? Why would it not have been right for them to do it themselves? What might have happened? What happened instead (v7)?
5. Since the church is still built through the prayerful preaching of the word, what implications might follow from this passage for our church life today?
6. Can you think of important areas of our church life which require godly people to manage? Who are the people currently taking up these vital responsibilities? What would be good to pray for them?
7. In what ways might the ministers in our church (those set aside to devote themselves to the word and prayer) be tempted or pressured to be diverted from this vital task? What could you do to help them maintain the right priorities?
8. Pray for our church – that our ‘life together’ would be well managed, and that the word of God will be clearly and powerfully proclaimed. Pray that God would enable this preaching to “flourish” and greatly multiply the number of disciples.

Acts 6:8–7:60 The Word is Hated

1. Can you think of times when religious leaders (even those who claim to serve the God of the Bible) oppose those who preach the gospel that Jesus is Lord of all?
2. Read Acts 6:8-15. How is Stephen described in this passage? What godly characteristics do we see in his life? Of what 'crime' is he charged?
3. Stephen stands up to defend himself. He gives a long account of the history of God's dealings with Israel. There are 2 main themes – the places where God has dwelt/worked, and the consistent rejection of God's initiatives by the people of Israel. Read through the speech and trace these themes. (There may not be an entry for each column for each section). Are there any other themes?

	Where did God work?	How did Israel Respond to God's Initiative
Acts 7:1-8		
Acts 7:9-16		
Acts 7:17-43		

4. In verses 44-53 Stephen reaches his conclusion. Read what he says and consider...
 - a. The particular accusation against Stephen (6:13-14) was that he spoke blasphemy against "this place" (the temple in Jerusalem) and "the law" (or "customs" handed down from Moses). What does Stephen wind up saying about these charges?
 - b. In what ways do the 2 themes of verses 1-43 reach a climax here?
5. In what ways might we make the same mistake as the Jewish leaders – thinking that God limits himself to special places, or particular peoples/cultures?
6. Now see what happens next in verses 54-60. What was it that really made them angry?
7. What is similar or different to the trial and execution of Jesus? Why do you think people can be so angry about the proclamation of Jesus as Lord?
8. Read John 15:18-16:4. What did Jesus promise his disciples? How do we see this still happening today – in other's lives, and in your own experience? What do you find inspiring or challenging about Stephen's words or manner?
9. Spend some time praying for Christians who are persecuted in our world today. Pray also for our response to criticism, ridicule, opposition or threat, especially as we seek to promote the good news of Jesus.

Acts 8:1-25 The Word in Samaria

1. Who are the people / what are the suburbs in our city that you would most hesitate to tell about Jesus? Why?
2. For first century Jews one of the most unlikely groups to respond to the gospel we're the Samaritans. John 4:9 tells us that Jews did not associate with them (think also of Jesus' parable about the good Samaritan).

"The Samaritans occupied the country formerly belonging to the tribe of Ephraim and the half-tribe of Manasseh. The capital of the country was Samaria, formerly a large and splendid city. When the ten tribes were carried away into captivity to Assyria, the king of Assyria sent people from Cutha, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvaim to inhabit Samaria (2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 4:2-11). These foreigners intermarried with the Israelite population that was still in and around Samaria.... The Samaritans embraced a religion that was a mixture of Judaism and idolatry (2 Kings 17:26-28). Because the Israelite inhabitants of Samaria had intermarried with the foreigners and adopted their idolatrous religion, Samaritans were generally considered "half-breeds" and were universally despised by the Jews." (<http://www.gotquestions.org/Samaritans>)

Read Acts 8:1-25. How did the Samaritans first come to respond to Jesus? (See v 4-8 & v 25). Who was clearly at work in this? (See also Acts 1:8).

3. How do you think the first Christians (who were Jewish) would have felt about Samaritans (even the ultimate pagan – Simon) turning to Jesus as the Jewish Messiah?
4. What does the Samaritan response imply about the rule of Jesus – as seen by Stephen in Acts 7:55-56?
5. How does this passage encourage us when we imagine that some people or groups are beyond the reach or the rule of Jesus and his gospel? How might this encouragement shape our prayers?
6. In verses 14-17 the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit. What does this teach us about their status before God and their relationship with the Jewish Christians? (see Acts 2:38-39 & 1 Corinthians 12:13)
7. Why do you think the Samaritans don't receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles arrive and lay hands on them? How do you think this would have helped the apostles? What does it confirm for us as readers?
8. Do you think their receipt of the Holy Spirit some time after conversion is told to us because it is the normal pattern for Christians, or because it is unique/special? Why?
9. Simon sought to buy the gift of God with money. What was wrong with his thinking? Can you think of ways that people today might attempt to use financial or other human power to obtain some spiritual blessing?
10. Give thanks that Jesus is Lord of the whole world. Give thanks that the Holy Spirit lives in all who turn to Jesus. Ask God to help you and others to surrender to Jesus and Lord and rely on God's grace to save us. Pray that God would cause the gospel to be heard and save people from among the groups you identified in Q1.

Acts 8:26-40 The Word and the Missionary God

1. When we look back on our lives, even though we have no direct word from God, we can see the hand of God at work to bring the gospel to us, and bring us to Christ. How have you seen God at work in your life? (Perhaps one or two could speak – as time permits).

2. After seeing God use Philip to take the gospel to the Samaritans (8:1-25), we see him bring an Ethiopian official to salvation. Read Acts 8:26-40.
 - a) In what ways does the text indicate the hand of God at work in bringing the Ethiopian to faith?

 - b) What can we conclude from the fact that this man was from Ethiopia (probably modern day Southern Sudan), a high ranking official in a foreign court, and a eunuch (a castrated man)?

3. Do you think what the Ethiopian says in verse 31 is true? Why or why not? If it is true, what implication might flow for our methods of evangelism today?

4. The passage the Ethiopian was reading was from Isaiah. Read Isaiah 53:1-12. If you had the opportunity to tell someone the good news about Jesus starting from Isaiah 53 – what would you say?

5. (If time permits) read Isaiah 56. If the eunuch kept reading in Isaiah how would he have been encouraged by this passage?

6. Give thanks that through Jesus acceptance into God's kingdom is available for people of every race and remote location – and for those with physical defects/disabilities. Choose some people (individuals or people groups) and pray that God would send them evangelists, and bring them to salvation in Jesus. Pray also specifically for God to build his kingdom through our overseas mission partners.

Acts 9:1-31 Look what happened to Saul!

1. In this study we will see how God brought Saul (later called Paul) to be not only a Christian, but to be a public preacher and God's apostle to the gentile world. His letters eventually formed much of the New Testament. However, in the first century, and still today, Paul is a controversial figure. What different views (positive or negative) have you heard expressed about Paul?
2. In Acts so far, what have we already learned about Saul? See 7:58 & 8:1-3.
3. Reads Acts 9:1-31.
 - a. What mix of thoughts and emotions do you think the early Christians would have experienced as they heard news of Saul's transformation?
 - b. From this chapter, how can we be assured that Saul's conversion and commission (v 15) is genuine? (In what different ways does the text do this?)
4. What do Jesus' words in verses 4-6 indicate about the relationship between Jesus and his people? How does this encourage or challenge our view of and relation to the church?
5. Saul's conversion and commission is recounted 3 times in the book of Acts (9:1-31, 21:37-22:21 & 26:1-23). Why do you think this is so important that Luke would repeat it 3 times and in great detail?
6. (As time permits) Paul also often made reference to his conversion in his letters. According to Paul himself, what can we learn from his conversion? See 1 Timothy 1:12-17, 1 Corinthians 9:1-2 & Galatians 1:1-2 & 11-24.
7. What have you learnt in this study that might help you to respond to someone who says - "I like what Jesus says, but I don't like Paul's teaching"?
8. Give thanks for the Apostle Paul's conversion, commission and subsequent ministry. Give thanks that his conversion is an example to sinners everywhere that God is gracious to those who would believe in Christ. Pray that we will listen appropriately to his words as a true apostle of Christ.

Acts 9:32-43 The Word and Miracles

1. Read Acts 9:32:43. As you read of these miracles, what impressions or reactions do you have? Do they increase your confidence in the gospel, or raise doubts? What other reactions do you imagine other people might have?
2. Let's look more closely at the text.
 - a. What details help to confirm that the miracles were genuine?
 - b. To whom does the text attribute these miracles?
 - c. Read Mark 2:10-12 & 5:35-43. What similarities can you see with the miracles in Acts? What does this suggest about how to understand the connection between Jesus and these miracles?

3. The key factor in understanding the meaning of a biblical narrative is its **context**. These miracles occur at a key point in the story of the progress of the gospel. So far (following the program announced in 1:8) we have seen the word of God at work in Jerusalem (see 6:7) then "breaking out" into Judea and Samaria (see 9:31). In chapters 10-11 a major new stage begins – God works through Peter to bring the first gentiles (non-Jews) to faith in Jesus. This would have raised massive questions for the early church. Is this really the work of God? Did Peter go too far in telling the gospel to people of other religions? Is Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, really Lord of the whole world?

How do the miracles in 9:32-43 increase 'certainty' (Luke 1:3-4) about what is about to happen?

4. (To stretch you!). Paul is commissioned as the Apostle to the gentiles (9:15) and will eventually take the gospel to the nations (Ch 13-26). Why then do you think the focus here is on Peter and why is he the one who first takes the gospel to the gentiles? How might this also increase confidence in what is happening? (Could it be an aspect of the special role given to Peter in Matthew 16:13-20??)
5. In reading the book of Acts it's important to work out what is unique/special for that time, and what is a pattern we can expect to see today. In other words: what is descriptive (what happened then), and what is prescriptive (what should happen now)? Given all we have seen, how do you think we should understand these miracles? Would it be legitimate to use this passage to argue that we should seek and/or expect miracles today? Why or why not?
6. "Jesus is Lord of all. Christians therefore proclaim Christ and seek to persuade people of every race, and religion to turn from whoever/whatever they believe, and turn to Jesus as Lord and Saviour." How is this viewpoint received in our world today? How does Acts 9:32-43 help you to be confident to share Christ with others, and be involved in local and world mission?
7. Each choose a person or group of people in our city. Pray for God to send people to speak to them about Jesus, and save them.