

The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

Lesson 4 Acts 5:17 – Acts 8:1

In awe of the apostles, the people keep their distance while in public circles. The apostles continue to proclaim boldly the gospel message on the porch of the temple, ignoring the warning of the Council. In fury, Caiaphas, the high priest, orders their imprisonment.

Peter and the Apostles Thrown in Jail – Released by Angels

Acts 5:17 But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy; **18** and they laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail. **19** But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, **20** "Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." **21** And upon hearing *this*, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and *began* to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates had come, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent *orders* to the prison house for them to be brought. **22** But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned, and reported back, **23** saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." **24** Now when the captain of the temple *guard* and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. **25** But someone came and reported to them, "Behold, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!"

The apostles do not remain in jail for long, being miraculously set free by an angel during the dark of the night. The angel tells them to teach the "whole message of this Life." We must not confuse this phrase as a Hebraism such as "the whole message of life" because that is not the angel's intent. The apostles are to teach in the temple the whole message of eternal life in the spiritual realm, not earthly life in the physical realm. Their teaching about spiritual life flies in the face of the so-called spiritual leaders of the temple. Nevertheless, about sunrise, the apostles follow the command of the angel and step into Solomon's portico and begin teaching the whole message of Life.

In bewilderment, the search begins for the apostles, but they are no further than a stone's throw away from their accusers.

Peter and the Apostles Before the Council Again

Acts 5:26 Then the captain went along with the officers and *proceeded* to bring them *back* without violence (for they were afraid of the people, lest they should be stoned). **27** And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them, **28** saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon

us." ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered and said, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. ³¹He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

We cannot help but notice the lack of struggle between the religious leaders and the apostles. How did the captain and the guardsmen bring the apostles in from the porch "without violence?" Since no arrest is made and no struggle ensues, did the captain simply invite the apostles to join the Council inside the temple? Since the Council is in need of the Lord as much as any other person in the world, the apostles are ready to speak with the religious leaders at any time and in any place. Their mission is to make disciples and no one is exempt from needing salvation.

After reminding the apostles of their order not to teach about Jesus, Peter and the others are kind and gracious, yet candid in their response. Peter does not stir the Council up with his response; rather, he causes them to ponder his words. In bewilderment, they send the apostles out on the porch and a wise Pharisee speaks to the whole Council.

The Wisdom of Gamaliel

Acts 5:33 But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and were intending to slay them. ³⁴But a certain Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. ³⁵And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. ³⁶For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody; and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. And he was slain; and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away *some* people after him, he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. ³⁸And so in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action should be of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."

The details in this passage are candid, straight forward, and easy to understand. However, we must ask the question, "how is Luke privy to the details of this private speech?" In every portion of the Scripture of Acts up to this point, an apostle is present to pass on the eyewitness account to Luke. But who gives the eyewitness account of this speech to Luke? Most likely it is Saul of Tarsus, the young zealous Pharisee and student of Gamaliel, who will become an apostle of the Lord.

Gamaliel's purpose and tone are interesting in this passage. Gamaliel is not ranting and raving to prove his point; he is simply laying out the facts of his position and opinion. He seems to be a consummate religious politician, but it is quite clear that his position is a stab at the theological absurdity of the Sadducees who deny the truth of the resurrection. The bantering of this theological topic constantly

overshadows the root of every debate among the Council. Gamaliel is not going to pass up this opportunity to put his religious opponents in their place. Even though it seems that he is championing the position of the apostles, he is not. He is an opportunist, not a disciple of Christ.

His advice is to let this movement run its course with little interference from the Council. The Council takes his advice, at least for the moment.

The Council Took Gamaliel's Advice

Acts 5:40 And they took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and then released them. **41** So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. **42** And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Even though the Council takes Gamaliel's advice, for some reason they add a beating to their warning on this day. The warning and flogging fail to stop the apostles from doing the job of preaching the gospel message everywhere everyday.

The First Major Complaint in the Church

Acts 6:1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

The freedom to preach the gospel in the city without the antagonism of the Council sets the stage for a great influx of new believers. As the number of church members grows into the thousands across national lines, the logistics of meeting the daily needs draws the first criticism within the church. By AD 30, converts to Judaism are in every nation under heaven. With the spread of the gospel after the Day of Pentecost, many of these Jewish converts find faith in the Lord Jesus and become part of the church. Widows who become part of the church lose their support from the synagogues for their daily meals and the church must now meet their needs. Evidently the care for widows of Israeli heritage is far better than the care for the widows of Greek heritage. The disparities between the two groups bring the first complaint to the attention of the apostles. The complaint has two facets, widowed women and money. The complaint is so sensitive that it requires true wisdom.

The First Church Business Meeting

Acts 6:2 And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. **3**"But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. **4**"But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." **5**And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The twelve, which includes Matthias as Judas' replacement, call the first business meeting of the church. The complaint includes an expectation that the apostles are responsible for the daily needs of the people as a whole and the widows in this specific instance. At the business meeting, which includes the entire church, not just the 120 who were in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles clarify their divine purpose in opposition to the desires of the complainers. Notice that the apostles do not select the seven men; rather, they instruct the people to make the selection. The congregation makes its selections and takes them to the apostles for approval. The apostles lay their hands on them, setting them aside for the work of providing for the needs of the Greek widows. The purpose of their selection is to serve the tables of various synagogues around Jerusalem built to provide a place of worship for Jews of non-Israeli heritage with varying languages.

Jewish Priests Became Believers

Acts 6:7 And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

With each passing day, the gospel penetrates the hearts of everyone who enters Jerusalem. The story of the Lord's resurrection is irrefutable as eyewitnesses include every person who lives in the vicinity of the city, whether they are believers or not. Even the priests are becoming believers, leaving the irrational religious system of Judaism.

Accusations Against Stephen

Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. **9** But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, *including* both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. **10** And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. **11** Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and *against God*." **12** And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council. **13** And they put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law; **14** for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." **15** And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel. **Acts 7:1** And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" ⁴⁰

Nothing is known about the work of the seven except Stephen. Luke uses Stephen's story to introduce Saul of Tarsus to the church. After selection by the church

⁴⁰ Once again there is an unfortunate chapter break in this passage, separating the accusation against Stephen from his answer to the Council.

Stephen is sent to Christian converts of Freedman, Cyrenian, Alexandrian, Cilician and Asian descent.⁴¹

Stephen, of Greek descent, does more in his job than just serve the tables and needs of the widows. He begins to mimic the practices of the apostles. Unlike the ministry of the apostles, Luke does not reveal the extent of Stephen's signs and wonders. Without further information we must rely on the four words Luke uses to describe Stephen. The NASB is not faithful to the original words when describing Stephen. The NASB says Stephen is "full of grace and power ... performing great wonders and signs." The passage should say "full of faith and power ... wonders and miracles." Disregarding today's definitions and reaching back to the definitions of AD 30 to be faithful to the intent, we would translate this passage as "full of persuasion and strength ... doing great sensations and indications." Stephen does not confine his work to the service of the tables as directed, but tackles all aspects of service to the Greek converts. His zealousness thrusts him into a verbal war with five different groups of Jews in Jerusalem, all of them unhappy relatives of the new converts to the church. The groups contrive lies about him and he ultimately finds himself before the Council of the Sanhedrin. However, the Council is still obliged to Gamaliel's recommendation and treats him with respect, giving him the opportunity to rebut what they believe are lies about him.

The two charges brought against Stephen include speaking against the temple teachings and changing the customs handed down by Moses. There is an element of truth in both of the trumped up charges so Stephen can not give a simple yes or no answer. Stephen passionately attempts to teach the teachers the history of Judaism, especially that Moses foretold the coming of the Messiah. His long summary does not bode well with the Council.

While Stephen's answer is an excellent summary for new believers today by providing a quick list of facts in chronological order from the Old Testament, it does little to persuade the Council. The answers of Peter and John are always short and to the point; Stephen's are long and rambling.⁴²

Stephen's Answer to the Council: Brief History of the Jewish Heritage

Acts 7:2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,⁴³ **3** and said to him, 'DEPART FROM YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'⁴⁴ **4** Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God removed him into this country in which you are now living.⁴⁵ **5** And He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground;

⁴¹ Freedmen were Jews, once slaves of Rome, but now free to settle where they wish. Many of them made their homes in Jerusalem and they are in such number that a synagogue was built specifically for them. Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians, and Asians are all Gentiles of Hellenistic descent, yet each of have a different dialect or language as well as the desire to worship with others of their same nationality. A separate synagogue is built in Jerusalem for each of these groups.

⁴² Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost contained 532 words. Stephen's message contains 1324 words.

⁴³ Psalm 29:3; Genesis 11:31; 15:7

⁴⁴ Genesis 12:1

⁴⁵ Genesis 11:31; 15:7; 12:5

and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS OFFSPRING AFTER HIM.⁴⁶ **6**"But God spoke to this effect, that his OFFSPRING WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. **7**" 'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY SHALL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'⁴⁷ **8**"And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so *Abraham* became the father of *Isaac*, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and *Isaac* became the father of *Jacob*, and *Jacob* of the twelve patriarchs.⁴⁸ **9**"And the patriarchs became jealous of *Joseph* and sold him into Egypt. And yet God was with him,⁴⁹ **10**and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.⁵⁰ **11**"Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction *with it*; and our fathers could find no food.⁵¹ **12**"But when *Jacob* heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers *there* the first time.⁵² **13**"And on the second *visit* Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh.⁵³ **14**"And Joseph sent *word* and invited *Jacob* his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons *in all*.⁵⁴ **15**"And *Jacob* went down to Egypt and *there* passed away, he and our fathers.⁵⁵ **16**"And *from there* they were removed to Shechem, and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.⁵⁶ **17**"But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, **18**until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH.⁵⁷ **19**"It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race, and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive.⁵⁸ **20**"And it was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God; and he was nurtured three months in his father's home.⁵⁹ **21**"And after he had been exposed, Pharaoh's daughter took him away, and nurtured him as her own son.⁶⁰ **22**"And Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. **23**"But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. **24**"And when he saw

⁴⁶ Deut. 2:5; Genesis 12:7; 17:8

⁴⁷ Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 3:12

⁴⁸ Genesis 17:10-14; 21:2-4; 25:26; 29:31-35; 30:1-24; 35:16-26

⁴⁹ Genesis 37:11; 28; 45:4

⁵⁰ Genesis 39:2-3; 21; 41:40-46; Psalm 105:21

⁵¹ Genesis 41:54-55; 42:5

⁵² Genesis 42:2

⁵³ Genesis 45:1-4

⁵⁴ Genesis 45:9-10

⁵⁵ Deut. 10:22

⁵⁶ Josh 24:32; Genesis 50:13

⁵⁷ Exodus 1:7-8

⁵⁸ Exodus 1:7-11, 15-22

⁵⁹ Exodus 2:2

⁶⁰ Exodus 2:5-6,10

one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. **25**"And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him; but they did not understand. **26**"And on the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' **27**"But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? **28**"YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' **29**"And at this remark MOSES FLED, AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons.⁶¹ **30**"And after forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. **31**"And when Moses saw it, he *began* to marvel at the sight; and as he approached to look *more* closely, there came the voice of the Lord: **32**'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' And Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. **33**"BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. **34**'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT, AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO DELIVER THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.'⁶² **35**"This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent *to be* both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush.⁶³ **36**"This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years.⁶⁴ **37**"This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD SHALL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.'⁶⁵ **38**"This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and *who was* with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.⁶⁶ **39**"And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt,⁶⁷ **40**SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT-- WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.'⁶⁸ **41**"And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.⁶⁹ **42**"But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL?'⁷⁰ **43**"YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU

⁶¹ Exodus 2:11-15, 22; 18:3-4

⁶² Exodus 3:1-10

⁶³ Exodus 2:14

⁶⁴ Exodus 7:3; 14:21; Numbers 14:33

⁶⁵ Deut. 18:15, 18

⁶⁶ Exodus 19

⁶⁷ Numbers 14:3-4

⁶⁸ Exodus 32:1, 23

⁶⁹ Exodus 32: 4, 6

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 19:13

MADE TO WORSHIP THEM. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.⁷¹ **44**"Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed *him* to make it according to the pattern which he had seen.⁷² **45**"And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David.⁷³ **46**"And *David* found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.⁷⁴ **47**"But it was Solomon who built a house for Him.⁷⁵ **48**"However, the Most High does not dwell in *houses* made by *human* hands; as the prophet says:⁷⁶ **49**'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord; 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? **50**'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?⁷⁷

Surely, up to this point in Stephen's discourse, the Sanhedrin is in full agreement. If Peter had given this message, his next point would be to bid the Council to call upon the name of the Lord as Savior. Stephen does not follow Peter's example. In his zealousness he attempts to persuade them with a verbal attack to put them in their place and rebuke them of their actions. He calls them stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart, words that stir their deepest anger and cause them to forget the wise council of Gamaliel.

Stephen's Railing Accusation against the Council

Acts 7:51"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.⁷⁸ **52**"Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; **53**you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Stephen oversteps his boundaries in many ways. His first duty is to serve the tables of the Greek widows and caring for their needs. His second duty is to follow the leadership of the apostles. He does not do this as he oversteps his first duties stirring up trouble in the remote areas of Jerusalem. His verbal attacks on the Council bring retaliation, not to Stephen only, but also to the entire church. Yet, "all things work for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose."⁷⁹ The Holy Spirit is guiding Stephen in this conflict. God's purpose is to lead Stephen to stir the hearts of the Council to anger.

⁷¹ Amos 5:25-27

⁷² Exodus 25:9-40

⁷³ Joshua 3:14-17; Deut. 32:49

⁷⁴ 2 Samuel 7:8-16; Psalm 132:1-5

⁷⁵ 1 Kings 6

⁷⁶ Isaiah 66:1-2

⁷⁷ Isaiah 66:1-2

⁷⁸ Exodus 33:3, 5; Jeremiah 9:26; 5:10; Numbers 27:14; Isaiah 63:10

⁷⁹ Romans 8:28

The Anger of the Council

Acts 7:54 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they *began* gnashing their teeth at him. **55** But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; **56** and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." **57** But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse.

Stephen's fate is set; the Council wants him dead. They run him out of the meeting room, down the streets and to the edge of the city.

The First Mention of Saul of Tarsus

Acts 7:58 And when they had driven him out of the city, they *began* stoning *him*, and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59** And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon *the Lord* and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" **60** And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep. **Acts 8:1a** And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.

In the council room, the heart of Saul of Tarsus is "cut to the quick"⁸⁰ by the words of Stephen and he is in hearty agreement with the death sentence. When the crowd begins to stone Stephen at the edge of the city, Saul is overseeing the entire event. It is the first mention of this Saul in the Scripture.

With Saul's introduction and Stephen's death, the first major pursuit of persecution for the church begins. The Council of the Sanhedrin will invest in Saul the authority to hunt and imprison Christians of notable prominence wherever he can find them.

⁸⁰ Acts 7:54