

Lesson 5 – Stoning of Stephen

Text: Acts 6-8:3

Main Characters: God, apostles, Stephen, ruling Jews, Saul

Key Passages:

- Acts 7:54-60 – Stephen was stoned for his faith in Jesus; yet, he prayed for them at his death.
- Acts 8:1-3 – As a result of the intense persecution, disciples scattered from Jerusalem.

Main Storyline:

The church grew steadily as the apostles continued to teach about Jesus in Jerusalem. During that time, however, the Grecian Jews (called Hellenists, these were Jews that were not from Palestine) began to complain that their needy widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. This seems to have been a legitimate problem for the apostles, perhaps caused by the enormity of the work involved in dispensing relief to thousands of people while continuing to preach and teach. It is reasonable that the widows that did not live in the area could be overlooked in this situation, as they may not have known or been known by many people.

To deal with the situation, the apostles called all of the disciples together and pointed out that it would not be right for them to neglect preaching the word of God in favor of serving food. Instead, they called on the disciples to find seven men who had good reputations, godly, and could be made appointed by the apostles over the business of distributing to the needy disciples. In delegating this work to these men, the apostles would be able to focus on prayer and teaching. The congregation of disciples was pleased with this decision, and they chose seven men, whom the apostles then laid hands upon, to handle this work.

One of the men who had been appointed over the work of distributing to the needy was Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He was teaching the people and performing miracles and signs to confirm his authority from God. (Note that Stephen is the first time someone besides an apostle had performed miracles in this time period. This was due to the fact that the apostles had laid hands upon him; more information can be found about this in Acts 8.) Some Jews began to debate Stephen, but they could not answer Stephen's arguments and wisdom. Since they could not succeed in debating Stephen, they convinced people to lie about him, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They also set up false witnesses to claim that Stephen was speaking against the temple and the law by claiming that Jesus was going to come and destroy the place and change their customs. Stephen was taken before the council of the ruling Jews, but the council, when they saw Stephen, saw his face was like the face of an angel.

The high priest asked Stephen if the things that they had heard were true. Stephen began his defense by reviewing the history of the Jews, starting with the life of Abraham. He emphasized that the Jews had often rejected the leaders that God had chosen for them, specifically pointing out the rejections of Joseph, Moses, and the prophets in various times. Stephen rebuked the council for their hardness of heart, pointing out that they had become betrayers and murderers of Jesus, just as their fathers had killed the prophets in years past.

When they heard all of this, the ruling Jews became furious and gritted their teeth in rage. Stephen, however, looked up into heaven, saw the glory of God, and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. The Jews cried out and rushed at him, refusing to listen any more. They threw him out of the city and began to throw stones at him to kill him. They gave their outer garments to a young man named Saul so he could watch them while they stoned Stephen. As they stoned Stephen, he cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Just as he was about to die, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." After this, a great persecution rose against the church, and disciples were scattered all throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Devout men carried Stephen away and buried him, weeping over his death. Saul persecuted the church furiously, going into the disciples' houses and dragging them off to prison for their faith in Jesus.

Lessons/Applications:

- 1.) The leadership of the church must address problems swiftly; the congregation must be involved also.
- 2.) Even in the face of persecution, we must be steady in our faith and our concern for the souls of others.