

**ACTS**

Please turn in your Bibles this evening to Acts chapter 6 as we continue our study through the Word of God.

Remember what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, **“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

In Acts chapter 2 we saw this empowerment by the Holy Spirit to move the Gospel message forward and the first place that we see this take place is Jerusalem.

This powerful witness saw the church begin with a bang and here in Acts chapter 6 it continues to spread through Jerusalem!

In fact, we see this through Acts chapter 7, the Gospel spreading through Jerusalem.

Then, in Acts 8 through 12 we see the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles in Judea and Samaria!

And in the remainder of the Book of Acts we see the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles to the uttermost part of the earth!

The empowerment and the accomplishment that Jesus promised did come to pass and it continues to come to pass.

You see, the work is not done. The Book of Acts has not ended but continues on in the lives of God’s people as they are moving the Gospel message forward by the empowering of God’s Spirit upon their lives!

Also, we need to understand that the church is not an organization but a living organism; it is not a building but people and thus, just as a living organism requires organization and structure, so does the church.

And we saw problems back in Acts chapter 5 with Ananias and Sapphira and how God dealt with their deceit. They were both struck dead by the Lord!

Tonight we will see more problems arise within the church and today, we think it is an oddity to have problems in the church. Make no mistake about it, we see it with the early church and I am sad to say that we see it today. And, sadly, we have seen it and we will continue to see it!

But this is an area that causes many problems in a church, “*I* want to do this!” “*I* think you should do it this way!” You see, it is an “*I*” problem, the same one that brought Lucifer down and it will bring us down if we go down that path!

And the reality is, for most of these issues that the churches face, it is not a doctrinal issue. What they are about are likes/dislikes. Let me show you what I mean with this true story, as hard as it is to believe, this is what happens in churches. We are told,

When a certain Dallas church decided to split, each faction filed a lawsuit to claim the church property. A judge finally referred the matter to the higher authorities in the particular denomination. A church court assembled to hear both sides of the case and awarded the church property to one of the two factions. The losers withdrew and formed another church in the area.

During the hearing, the church courts learned that the conflict had all begun at a church dinner when a certain elder received a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him. Sadly, this was reported in the newspapers for everyone to read. Just imagine how the people of Dallas laughed about that situation!

The tiniest events sometimes cause great problems. Again and again a church has warded off a frontal attack only to be subverted from within.

Acts 6 shows us Satan trying to disrupt the inward peace of the early church. Wonderful things were happening as the new church grew by leaps and bounds. Three thousand received Christ at Pentecost. Another 2,000 were added shortly thereafter. Acts 5 tells us that many more were then added to the church. Satan, unhappy about God's successes, sowed a spirit of murmuring and gossip among God's people, hoping to set believer against believer.

Countless works for God have been destroyed in this way. God blesses a work, souls come to Christ, the church reaches its community, missionaries are sent out. Then someone complains that he or she is not appreciated or is being neglected. Perhaps this comes in the form of a critical glance, a name forgotten, a social gaffe [blunder], or some imagined offense. Bitter dissension ignites and spreads, and the whole work goes up in flames.

Acts 6 describes such a situation. The delicate unity of the early church became endangered, threatening the spiritual testimony of many thousands of believers.

We might think everybody would have been so occupied with each day's new blessings that there was no room for murmuring. Not so!

- R. Kent Hughes, Acts – The Church Afire, pp. 93-94

Thus, as we will see tonight, when problems arise, they will be dealt with in a powerful way when the Holy Spirit does the directing. When we do something and then ask God to bless it, that is like putting the cart in front of the horse and it doesn't work, it is not fruitful.

And when people are open to what God is doing, when they are willing to surrender their lives to the Holy Spirit's guiding, there is a beautiful peace and unity. But most of the time, like I have said, **"I"** gets in the way and things become a mess. There is disunity, wars, confusion.

With that as our background, let's begin reading in Acts chapter 6, beginning in verse 1 and let's see what the Lord has for us as we study through His Word.

## **ACTS 6**

### **VERSE 1**

Keep in mind that the church in Jerusalem had grown very quickly. Back in Acts chapter 2 we saw the Lord add to the church those being saved, Acts 2:47.

Now here in Acts chapter 6 He is multiplying disciples. That means that at this point the church could have been some 20,000 to even 30,000 people!

That is what God does, but He also does subtractions from the church as we saw last week with Ananias and Sapphira. God will do that and many times those that leave are a blessed subtraction because they are causing strife, difficulty, they have their own agenda.

Other times God just moves people. In either case, God always adds, He always multiplies back to replace those who have left, and I have seen that over the years.

Now here is the thing that many people miss. As God is working, as God is moving and growing a church, Satan is there, and he is trying to destroy the church and he will do so in many different ways.

We have seen Satan try to destroy the church through persecution, but that didn't work, it just grew faster.

He tried to destroy the church through sin, but God stepped in and judged the sin, and the church grew again.

His next move was to cause dissension within the church, all kinds of internal conflict, fighting with each other, discrimination, and you know what, He seems to be winning that battle today.

Maybe you heard of the man who was shipwrecked on an island, all alone, for some 30 years before he was rescued. After he was rescued and as they pulled away, the rescuer saw three huts back on the island and he asked the man why there were three huts if he was there alone.

The man said, "The one to the right is my house."

The other man said, "Okay, what about the other one?"

He replied back, "That is the church I go to!"

Impressed but still confused by the last remaining hut, the man asked once again, "What about the other one?"

And the man replied back, "That was the church I use to belong to!"

Now we laugh at the foolishness of that, but I am sorry to say, in the twenty-three years I have been here in ministry, I have seen that over and over again. People leave for the silliest of reasons.

And that may offend some people saying the reason some left was silly, but when you listen to their reasons, it is totally silly, foolish, it is not doctrinal at all!

And in the end, they let Satan win. Be careful you don't let "**I**" get in the way and cause you to be so self-centered that you do something foolish!

Now what is the problem here in Acts chapter 6? It was a problem between two groups of people and how one group felt neglected.

You see, the Hellenist Jews felt their widows were not being treated fairly by the Hebrew Jews in handing out not only food, but supplies to live by.

Why would they feel that way? The reason is really simple, but again, foolish, silly. You see, the Hellenistic Jews were part of the Diaspora and followed the Greek culture, spoke the Greek language and were looked down upon by the Hebrew Jews as compromisers of their faith.

On the other hand, the Hellenistic Jews saw the Hebrew Jews as a holier-than-thou people.

Thus, you can see how Satan could use that to cause division here. Now were they really being treated unfairly here? I doubt it, but we don't know for sure, but in any case, they perceived that they were and to let that continue on would have caused a division. This was a very difficult problem for the early church to deal with.

And before you point the finger at their child-like behavior, we see that today as Christians organize themselves in groups of denominations, or this group or that group and they look down upon each other instead of working with each other for the building up of the Kingdom of God!

Now I am not saying we compromise our faith to work together, not at all. But there are Christians out there we can work with and should work with for the building up of the Kingdom of God!

As one writer put it, "It's important to remember that though the titles **Hebrews** and **Hellenists** are used, *these were Christians, followers of Jesus*. They were all from a Jewish background, but they had all embraced Jesus as their Messiah."

So here is this major problem, how were they going to handle it? What were they going to do? Let's read on and see.

VERSES 2-4

Here we see the 12 apostles working together, including Matthias who was chosen back in Acts chapter 1 to be a part of this group.

And they looked at this situation and they sought a solution to this problem. And they said, **“It is not desirable that we should leave the work of God and serve tables.”**

Please understand that they did not mean that this work was beneath them, they were apostles and should not be doing it. But they recognized the fact that they could not do it all and they needed assistance in the work.

And their solution to this problem was to pick seven men for this ministry.

Today, when a need arises, we tend to put people in just to fill the spot, but that is not what they are doing here.

These men had to have a good reputation in the community; they were not men that were evil or dishonest.

That is important! It is as Proverbs 22:1 says, **“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, Loving favor rather than silver and gold.”**

Next, they were to be full of the Holy Spirit, which is they needed to be saved and they also were men who were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And lastly, they must be full of wisdom. Yes, they needed Biblical knowledge, but they also needed the wisdom of God to apply those things correctly in their lives.

It is as I Chronicles 12:32 says, **“From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the temper of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take.”** NLT.

Agree with me or not, and there are those over the years who don't agree with me on this. But I do not put someone in a ministry just because there is a need!

Years ago there was a need for youth ministry and there truly was no one to do it. And the kids wanted to get together and thus, I oversaw that ministry until God raised someone up who could over see it. And it was years before that took place.

Here's the thing. It is much harder to remove someone from ministry if there are problems and thus, I don't rush into putting someone in a ministry.

Years ago I had someone who wanted me to just put someone over a ministry because there was a need, and that is not what I do. The reason is simple, I would rather wait until God shows me the person it will be, a person who is of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, a person who is faithful in service, than to just place someone to fill that ministry, for that is only trouble!

And notice what they do here in Acts 6:3, they say, **“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”**

They go to these Hellenist Christians who are feeling neglected and they tell them to pick seven men who are of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and have wisdom to oversee this work!

That is interesting to me because if they pick seven men they are responsible for their actions, for this work.

Why didn't the apostles oversee this ministry? Because they said **“... ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. . . . but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’”** Acts 6:2b, 4.

Notice, prayer and then the Word of God. You see, you can't preach on what you don't know, and God will show you as you pray and mediate upon Him and His Word.

That is my priority here at this church, to pray and minister the Word of God to you.

Yes, I do many other things also, we are a small church and even if we weren't I would still be doing other things because I feel I am a servant.

I also know that in time God will raise up various people for various ministries to assist in the work.

I look at the radio ministry, for example. Now there are things I can do in that ministry, but God has raised up people to do that work. And I would be hindering what God is doing in them and through them by getting in the way and doing that work.

God has raised up people like Max and Mickey and Conrad and Milton and others who are doing the work for the radio station. And I think they are blessed that they can serve God in that role. And what is wonderful is that we are blessed by the work they are doing as well!

That is how it is to work. People wonder why I don't do this and don't do that but the reality is, there is only so much I can do.

And the wonderful thing is, that if I don't get in the way God can raise up people to do those things.

Now, as much as I am involved in other things in the church, I will tell you this. To the best of my ability I try not to allow those other things to get in my way of ministering to you the Word of God. I take the time so that what I give to you is not just fluff, not just worldly wisdom, but the heart of God.

Now, if something did get in the way of me teaching, then that other ministry would be put on hold, because, again, my priority is to prayer and to the ministry of the Word of God!

Paul illustrates that commitment to these things in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders as he said, **“And when they had come to him, he said to them: ‘You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.’”** Acts 20:18-21.

But that is not happening today. We don’t see sound doctrine being taught but fluff and the results are devastating. Let me show you what I mean. We are told,

In the past several decades we have seen massive church growth. Church attendance in the world is at an all-time high. Yet, in most places of the world, cultural decline keeps accelerating at an alarming rate.

For example, in spite of now having numerous megachurches with over 20,000 attendees, social issues that undermine Judeo-Christian values like abortion, same-sex marriage and threats to religious liberty continue to be on the rise. This has often troubled many people who wonder why a nation like the United States could have so many people who claim to be evangelical, born-again believers (some estimate as many as 45 million, not including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal and mainline Protestant churches) and yet far-left political leaders continue to be elected by people of faith. . . .

What is the reason for this? For the most part, many pastors do not train and equip their leaders with a biblical worldview as related to public policy. Much of the preaching and teaching today is bereft of sound doctrine and amounts to nothing more than self-help messages, free (cheap) grace and great rhetoric without doctrinal substance. Many churches have no real process of theologically grounding believers to make them disciples of Christ.

In essence, church growth, the raising of tithes and offerings, and making people happy enough to want to keep coming back to church are more important to many pastors than preaching the whole counsel of God and turning wimpy, whiny saints into the army of the living God, who goes forth to withstand the hosts of hell by bringing the power and truth of the kingdom to every realm of society! The church Jesus said He would build would assail the gates of hell, not succumb and make peace with them (Matt. 16:18-19).

In reality, many of the attendees of our churches have made a truce with the world and adopt worldly values because they deem it easier than being counter-cultural and not fitting in with their ungodly friends. This is in spite of the apostle James telling us that friendship with the world is to be an enemy of God (James 4:7).

The following are signs a pastor is merely gathering a crowd and not building a church.

**1. Their preaching is meant to make people happy, not holy.** I learned a long time ago that God doesn't really care if I am happy! His goal for me is maturity into sonship so I can be led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14) rather than merely remaining a child (Rom. 8:17). When training our children often they cry because we don't always give them what they want. Any pastor whose main goal is to make people feel good with his or her preaching cannot possibly stand in the pulpit as a prophet speaking the very oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11) because sometimes God's Word is meant to correct, adjust and rebuke us so we will repent.

**2. Their goal is to fill church seats, not make disciples.** In my over 30 years of ministry I have noticed that many local churches don't have a goal of processing new believers through a rigorous, hands-on grid of discipleship. Consequently, they are churning out flibbity-jibbity church attendees who constantly drink the milk of the Word - depending on the hype, excitement and emotion of the worship experience to carry them through till next week - rather than God-fearing mature believers whom God can place in positions of influence to bring cultural

transformation. If a pastor's only goal in preaching is to be seeker sensitive to fill up every seat, then his or her preaching will be a mile wide and an inch deep resulting in church attendees who will be a mile wide and an inch deep!

**3. They would rather offend God than men.** Some preachers intentionally avoid using biblical words such as repentance, hell, sin, the cross, judgment and other words that evoke a negative emotive response in the crowd. Consequently, they are more concerned with offending the people than they are concerned with pleasing God!

**4. They gauge their success by cultural acceptance and large crowds.** Pastors building a crowd rather than a biblical church often gauge their success by things like having a good relationship with the mayor; having every political and community leader liking them; having large gatherings on Sundays and special events; and by having large amounts of money collected in the weekly offerings. I have a hard time seeing these issues as the primary biblical gauge for success.

When a large crowd was following Jesus He didn't give them a seeker-sensitive message that appealed and appeased them so they would continue to follow Him. He spoke bluntly and boldly to them to make sure they counted the cost of discipleship and knew what they were getting into before committing to following Him (Luke 14:25-33)!

**5. There is no process in the church for biblical discipleship.** Churches that are merely gathering crowds don't care about making disciples. This is opposed to Scripture because Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not merely bring in new converts (Matt. 28:19).

**6. They allow people to become members without vetting them.** Pastors merely concerned with gathering a crowd will allow any and all attendees to become official members. Those pastors who are building a biblical church will have a godly standard of membership so that those unwilling to repent will not dare join themselves to the church (Acts 5:13), and those who do become members have proven their repentance with good works (Matt. 3:8; Acts 26:20).

**7. Their focus is on the Sunday service more than releasing people to their vocation in the world.** Pastors merely building a crowd care more about filling every seat to show their influence and popularity than about equipping and sending church attendees into the world as missionaries and ministers of the kingdom. To them, it is more important to get their community into the church building for Sunday services than it is to send the church attendees into the community to serve according to their vocation.

**8. The worship service is meant to entertain the flesh instead of convert the sinner.** Pastors merely building a crowd put much time, money and technological effort into making each Sunday service an existential experience that entertains and touches the emotive [sensitive] part of each person more than believing for the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit to come through the worship and preaching to bring brokenness, repentance and transformation to both sinner and saint alike. I have heard some worship teams with excellent musicians, sound and incredible polish who only touched my intellect or emotions because they were entertaining man instead of ministering to the Lord!

In closing, although I believe very strongly in evangelism, church growth and having a spirit of excellence in worship, media, technology and the arts in regard to worshipping God and preaching, our goals must be to please God, convert sinners and equip the saints to change the world and manifest kingdom power and influence on the earth.

We cannot tolerate anything less than this to merely attract a crowd rather than allow Jesus to build His church! Only a church He builds can withstand the gates of hell!

- <https://ministrytodaymag.com/leadership/culture/22026-8-signs-you-are-gathering-a-crowd-instead-of-building-a-church>

That is why it is so important for me to pray and to study and prepare to share with you what God has shown me!

And make no mistake about it, the ministry is a lot of work, even apart from administrative headaches.

A young man said to Donald Grey Barnhouse, "I'd give the world to be able to teach the Bible like you." Looking him straight in the eye, Dr. Barnhouse replied: "Good, because that's exactly what it will cost you."

In the ministry the top priority is the Word of God, the teaching of the Word of God. That's what God has called the minister to do. Jesus said to Peter, feed My sheep. So that was the top priority of the apostles. It was waiting upon God in prayer and studying the Word of God in order that they might teach the people God's Word.

VERSES 5-7

As you read this you can see that they didn't pick 4 Hebrew Jews and 3 Hellenists Jews, or 3 Hebrew Jews and 4 Hellenists Jews, but all 7 were Hellenists for they all had Greek names!

The people (and the apostles) showed great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing Hellenists to take care of the widows' distribution.

Boice put it like this, "I would imagine there were more Aramaic-speaking Christians in the church than there were Greek-speaking Christians, but the church as a whole said, let's elect Greek-speaking leaders."

That is love, that is humility, that is not allowing Satan's schemes to work.

Over the years I have seen Satan's schemes cause all kinds of trouble, don't let it happen! Be open to God's Spirit, be sensitive to the needs of others, and see what love will do!

Also, notice that this was not just done by popular opinion, but the apostles agreed, confirming this was of God!

And we are told that they prayed over these men and they laid hands on them, which showed that they have been appointed for this work!

Now, as we are going to see, Stephen and Philip are going to be used mightily by God. But, please understand that all of these men, including Stephen and Philip, they waited on tables faithfully.

They didn't come into this thinking it was a stepping stone for something bigger. They didn't think the task of waiting on tables was below them. They faithfully served, and God faithfully raised up two of these men for another work, and we will see that over the next few chapters.

Interesting, isn't it, of the apostles we know nothing of their further ministry? Here are two men, not even apostles, but yet a chapter is given to each to tell of their expanded ministry after their faithfulness in the place where God had put them.

I have discovered that this principle should be followed. That we start wherever God opens the door of opportunity and we are faithful there. And as the Lord said, you've been faithful over a few things, now I will make you ruler over many (Matthew 25:23). That does seem to be sort of a principle by which the Lord operates.

As I look at what happens many times in churches, it is amazing the number of people who want to be pastors or be in some visible ministry, that don't want to teach in the Sunday School, they don't want to be in the nursery, they don't want to clean the church, they don't want to do these things because they are below them to do. **GARBAGE!**

I will let you in on a little secret, I look for people for ministry that are just serving, I look for people for ministry that don't need a title to serve, they don't care what needs to be done, they are willing to do it, I don't have to force them or keep asking them to do it, they just do it.

On the other hand, those that are just sitting around or those that week in and week out I have to remind them or ask them if the work is done, sorry, that just tells me you are not serious about the work.

And if you are in ministry and you just don't show up, not looking for someone to fill-in for you, forget about it.

Jesus said in Luke 16:10, "**He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.**"

Also, in Zechariah 4:10a we are told, **“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin . . .”** NLT.

Let me say this, whatever ministry God has placed me in I did it with joy in my heart and desired to take it as far as I could to bring glory to God.

From setting up chairs and taking them down, to the nursery ministry, the Sunday School ministry, small groups leader, assistant pastor and pastor, I did it with joy not seeking to get anything but just doing it unto the Lord knowing that my service is to Him, I was serving Him through others! May that be your heart also!

Now, even though the title is not given to them, I think what we are seeing here is the institution of the office of deacons (Gk. “*diakonos*” = *servants*). The basic difference between a deacon’s ministry and that of an elder (which the apostles were) is explained here in Acts 6. Elders (pastors) take care of the spiritual needs of the congregation, and the deacons take care of the physical needs.

And the result of this is seen in verse 7 where we are told, **“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”** Acts 6:7.

The church grew because the apostles were free to teach the Word of God and the church grew because of the unity in the church, they saw beyond themselves and towards the greater calling of God and these things touched the lives of others around them!

Not only that but what a witness these believers were. We are told that the priests, those ministering in the Temple were getting saved.

I have this idea, that some of these men were serving in the Temple when the Lord gave up His Spirit and died on the cross of Calvary and that veil in the Temple, some 60 feet wide, 30 feet high and between 10 and 18 inches thick and taking some 100 priests just to hang, was torn from top to bottom, signifying that God had opened the way into His presence through Jesus Christ! (Matthew 27:51-53). Now, as they hear the truth, they give their lives to Jesus!

Let me share this with you before we move on because we have experienced some problems over the last several months and I think it is important for us to understand what God desires of us. We are told,

When Satan does not succeed in stopping the church with a frontal assault, he attacks from within. This usually happens subtly – an invitation not sent, a job unnoticed, a critical comment overheard, jealousy over something that really does not matter (like the size of a ham slice). When the murmuring begins, the devil smiles.

Ken Taylor, in his *Romans for the Family Hour*, relates the following story:

One hot day a family traveling down the highway between Johnstown and Jamestown stopped at Farmer Jones's place to ask for a drink of water, which he gladly gave them.

"Where are you headed?" he asked them.

"We are moving from Johnstown to Jamestown to live," they told him. "Can you tell us what the people there are like?"

"Well, what kind of people did you find where you lived before?" Farmer Jones asked.

"Oh, they were the very worst kind!" the people said. "They were gossipy and unkind and indifferent. We are glad to move away."

"Well, I am afraid you will find the same in Jamestown," replied Farmer Jones.

The next day another car stopped, and the same conversation took place. These people were moving to Jamestown, too.

“What kind of neighbors will we find there?” they asked.

“Well,” said Farmer Jones, “what kind of neighbors did you have where you lived before?”

“Oh, they were the very best! They were so kind and considerate that it almost broke our hearts to have to move away.”

“Well, you will find exactly the same kind again,” Farmer Jones replied.

When believers are unhappy and begin to murmur, the first place to look for the problem is in their own hearts. Christians who are unhappy at their last church or town or job are probably unhappy where they are now. If they feel they have just cause for criticism, by all means they should express it to the right people in an appropriate way. But they must avoid murmuring or gossiping and must be willing to be part of the solution. . . .

We must not just complain but must be willing to lead, to delegate, and, to above all, to serve.

- R. Kent Hughes, Acts The Church on Fire, pp. 98-99

How true that is and what an important lesson for us to learn and apply to our lives!

### VERSE 8

Notice that as Stephen faithfully served the Lord, waiting on tables, dispensing food and other things for these widows, As he is serving God we see God not only working in Stephen but through Stephen doing many great wonders and signs through Him!

God is moving, God is working, the people were stirred, some to the faith, and some against the faith as we are going to see.

When God is working there is always the opposition trying to stop the work of God. That is important to remember.

And I will be honest with you. With over twenty-three years in ministry, I have seen a lot. It has not been easy. And if I did not have the calling of God on my life, for this work, I would have been gone long ago.

I am not complaining, I know what God has called me to do and He has equipped me to do it and I rest in that. I am excited to see what God is going to do but again, not because it is easy, but He has called me and He will see me through it all.

We will see that with Stephen!

#### VERSES 9-10

Now these men, probably from three different synagogues, are causing trouble. The synagogue of the Freedmen were probably the descendants of Jewish slaves that were captured by Pompey in 63 B. C. and taken to Rome. Then, later they were released and formed a Jewish community there.

Then the synagogue of Cyrenians and Alexandrians were two major cities of North Africa. Both had large Jewish populations.

And finally, we read of the synagogue of Cilicia and Asia which were Roman provinces in Asia Minor.

Who was from Tarsus there in Cilicia? That was Paul's hometown, (Acts 21:39; 22:3)

And it is very possible that Paul attended their synagogue there in Jerusalem.

How can I be so sure? Think about it. He was there for the events surrounding the trial of Stephen, we are told that in Acts 7:58 and Acts 8:1. Thus, it is very possible that he even participated in this debate with Stephen!

How could Stephen stand against these more educated men? Because Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit was overflowing in his life like torrents of living water! The Holy Spirit brought to remembrance to Stephen what he needed to say!

And they could not argue against what Stephen was saying, they were put to silence you might say. Stephen was not arguing with them, but sharing, no doubt, about the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His claim to be the Messiah. And the Holy Spirit gave to Stephen the word of Wisdom, a supernatural Spiritual gift to put these men to silence!

And what happens when you are losing a debate? Well, let's read on and see what they do because this is what happens many times.

#### VERSES 11-15

What happens when you begin to lose a debate? You have to resort to lies, and that is what we see here.

They get false witnesses to testify against Stephen. It sounds very much like what they did to Jesus in Matthew 26:59-61 where we are told, "**Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward and said, 'This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'"**"

Thus, like they did with Jesus, they stirred up the people against him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the 71-member Jewish religious council!

Now what they accused Stephen of was probably half true, they just twisted it to make their point and to put Stephen down.

And I love the picture they are painting here. The council members sat there growling, ugly faced, angry, mad; and then we look at Stephen and his face was angelic!

Two points here. The first is that Stephen had a close relationship with God and thus, his face shined the glory of God as did Moses in Exodus 34:29, **“Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.”**

Secondly, he had a peace about the situation he was in and it was reflected by his countenance, his appearance, he radiated the peace of God.

How come when we have people growling at us, angry at us, mad at us; we don't look like angels?

Because we have taken our eyes off of God and we are not trusting in Him.

Thus, instead of shining His glory, we too are growling back. Instead of having peace, we are anxious.

Now, let me say this, we see these things manifested in our lives not when things are going well, but when they are not going well, when we are tired, frustrated, being treated unfairly, or whatever the case may be, and then we make excuses for our behavior – that should not be.

Look at Stephen and how he responded – a man full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and it showed! As false accusations, lies, and anger preceded the rocks that would soon follow, Stephen’s face reflected neither hatred nor horror, but heaven.

Addressing his students concerning ministry, C. H. Spurgeon said, “Men, when you teach on heaven, let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a smile on your lips. When you teach on hell, your normal face will do fine.” I like that but it should not be true. Our faces should glow with the love of God toward a world that is at war with us!

Next time we will move into Acts chapter 7 and, as we are going to see, Stephen defends his faith before the Sanhedrin in a very powerful way. Richard Longenecker comments on this by saying,

The defense of Stephen before the Sanhedrin is hardly a defense in the sense of an explanation or apology calculated to win an acquittal. Rather, it is a proclamation of the Christian message in terms of the popular Judaism of the day and an indictment of the Jewish leaders for their failure to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah or to appreciate the salvation provided in him.

- The Acts of the Apostles, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 9, p 337

And Bruce said: “Such a speech as this was by no means calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. It is rather a defense of pure Christianity as God’s appointed way of worship.”

May that be our witness to a lost world, that our face is that of an angel, at peace because we are walking with God and His love, His nature that is in us will be manifested through us!