

Study 6 The book of Acts Ch 6: verse 8 to Ch 8 verse 1.

The ministry and death of Stephen.

The link between our last study and this one is the mention of Stephen. One of those selected to oversee the distribution of food for the Greek – speaking members of the church, Stephen is now caught up in a confrontation regarding his preaching at Jerusalem with some members of the synagogue. There was likely a number of synagogues in Jerusalem at this time. These members were all freed slaves, though we do not know a much more than that about them.

The issue with Stephen seems to be the power and wisdom of his message and the inability of those who differed from him to combat him. So they make up false stories about Stephen in a similar way others did to Jesus in order to discredit him. Stephen is arrested and brought before the Jewish high council in Jerusalem.

Stephen is asked to speak and gives a very detailed response. Beginning with Abraham, Stephen demonstrates his thorough knowledge of the Old Covenant and traces the journey of Abraham's family to the land of promise, down to Egypt and eventually back to the Promised Land. During this extended talk Stephen focuses on Moses, perhaps in due regard for the emphasis they placed on the Law. Stephen was also accused of falsely representing Moses and the Temple so he clears that up by presenting the story in an acceptable way. He finished his history with Solomon and the building of the Temple.

All is good thus far until Stephen highlights the rebellion of Israel as far back as Moses at certain times and then draws the comparison with the people of Jerusalem in rejecting Jesus as their Messiah.

It is certainly a bold speech and infuriates the Jewish leaders who then turn upon Stephen and have him stoned to death. Like Jesus, Stephen asks God not to hold their actions against them. Saul is mentioned at the end no doubt in preparation for his actions later on in continuing the persecutions of the early church.

With Stephen we can see the slow progression of persecution get more severe as first it began with a warning with Peter and John, then a flogging and finally someone dying. It was inevitable, considering the opposition to Jesus as the Messiah from the Jewish authorities. Something had to give and Stephen will become the first of many to be put to death for their faith in Jesus.

The end of Chapter 7 concludes Luke's picture of the church in Jerusalem. He will come back to Jerusalem later on, but from now on with persecution beginning in an organised way, the church will spread out and take its message to the surrounding areas.

Questions for reflection.

1. Stephen combined helping to serve food to the widows with preaching the word of God. Share your thoughts about how serving and preaching are related.
2. Stephen as a Jew knew the history of his people in detail. Could you give a summary of the Old Covenant? If not why not start reading your bible from beginning to end?
3. Stephen accuses the Jewish leaders of not following the movement and direction of the Old Testament that led to Jesus. Why do you think they missed seeing Jesus?
4. What are the highlights for you of the first stage of the church's life?