



SENT – Part 7 EVEN UNTO DEATH

Last week, we looked at **Acts 5:12-42**. Once again, the Apostles found themselves under arrest for preaching the Gospel before the Jewish people in the Temple, but an angel of the Lord intervened to release them from prison. The chief priests confronted the Apostles, and we witnessed what genuine Christianity in a broken and hostile world looked like. If we are going to be Christians who make an impact for the Kingdom, we must learn to trust God supremely, witness at every opportunity, and obey no matter what.

This week, we will look at **Acts 6-7**. The early church faces yet more problems with its “everything held in common” model. Certain groups of people within the congregation are being neglected, and the Apostles seek to remedy the situation by appointing the first ever deacons. Stephen is introduced as one of these seven, and he is brought before the Sanhedrin for declaring the Gospel. After explaining how the Old Testament parallels the Jews’ treatment of Jesus, he is stoned to death. What we learn is that God calls us to His purpose, which is to speak the truth to advance the Gospel. Our obedience leads to opportunities, but our obedience is required even unto death.



BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Any life updates?
- What is something the group can be praying about?
- What is something the group can praise this week?

- Does church ever feel to you like a "spectator sport?" As though everyone else is doing the truly "important" work?
- How do you view Christians who have laid down their lives? Have you ever considered the possibility for yourself?
- Do you know the story of the Old Testament and how Jesus fits into it?



BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Seven Chosen to Serve

The early church continues to see immense growth as the Gospel is proclaimed throughout Israel, but a new problem arises within the congregation. The text says the Hellenists brought forth a complaint against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. To recap, the early church worked within what we might call an “everything in common” model. That is, everyone who joined the church sold the totality of their belongings and contributed to a collective pool of resources that is then shared amongst the congregation according to who has need.

The first problem with this model was witnessed in chapter five with Ananias and Sapphira, who promised to sell their land and to donate the full proceeds to the church but lied to feign virtue while keeping the money for themselves. The second problem with this model is the potential for the neglect of church members. The Hellenists in the church were not being provided for according to their needs, yet the Hebrews were. For context, “Hellenists” and “Hebrews” is likely a reference to the languages the two groups speak. Hellenist would refer to Jews who speak Greek, and Hebrews would refer to Jews who speak Hebrew or Aramaic.

We are not entirely sure why the Hellenists were not receiving what they needed, but it is entirely possible that the church faced a logistical challenge due to its rapid growth. As the early church grew in number, adding more Hellenist Jews to the congregation, they were either unable to keep up with demand or unable to allocate the resources effectively. The latter option is much more likely, as the Apostles solution is to assign seven men to manage the distribution of resources to the entire church to ensure no one is neglected. These men represented the first deacons ever in the church.

God Calls Us to His Purpose

The complaint in Acts 6 is a big deal because it threatens the unity of the church and their witness to the outside world. How can the church help the world if it cannot take care of its own members? Jesus said the world would know we are His disciples by the love we have for one another, but here those who were once united in heart and soul were divided by stomach and culture.

To be clear, the Hellenists’ complaint was legitimate, but what should have been as simple and trivial as proper distribution of resources had become a source of division across social lines. Distributing resources may seem like an unimportant task, but for



the Apostles it was not so. According to them, the seven who should be appointed must have a good reputation and the presence of the Holy Spirit in them. Far from insignificant, “anyone can do it” jobs, to help the church with its everyday needs required some of the strongest, most godly people in the congregation.

We tend to view what the Apostles did as the “real” work of the church where the Spirit was truly needed, but Acts tells us the Spirit is needed even in the work that is less seen or emphasized. It is true the primary job of the church is to stay connected to God through prayer and to proclaim the Gospel, which is what the Apostles say they must continue doing instead of becoming church managers. If you don’t have this, you don’t have a church. We can feed the poor, care for those in our gathering, and do great social work, but if we do it in a way that is disconnected from God and His will, failing to proclaim the Word of God and the message of Jesus, then none of it matters. For this reason, the Apostles choosing seven to tend to the everyday needs of the church is a matter of priority rather than prominence.

The Apostles aren’t avoiding what they don’t want to do, but rather acknowledging they can’t do everything on their own. In fact, the Apostles’ solution to the problem raised by the Hellenists insists all in the church are called to ministry, not just them. For a church to operate effectively, it requires everyone to be involved and serving, not complete and total dependence on a few individuals who hold all the power. You have a role to play in your church even if it isn’t glamorous. To be sure, work like that of the seven is much more likely to go unnoticed. Although the Apostles did not seek fame, they certainly became well-known and remembered among those in the early church. The seven appointed by them to manage the church could scarcely be named by Christians today even though their names are indeed recorded in Acts.

However, their sacrifice of the spotlight allowed the early church to survive, and it’s the participation of everyday Christians in jobs most certainly underappreciated today that keep the church afloat. God is calling each of us to His purpose, even if in our eyes it doesn’t seem like a great purpose. Whether we receive praise from man for our efforts or not, God sees it and will reward us according to what we have done. Stephen is one such person who models this for us. One of the seven appointed as deacon by the Apostles, his faithfulness to do the “smaller” work of the church led to some of the church’s greatest success in that time.

Obedience Leads to Opportunity

The text says that Stephen did great wonders and signs among the people, which testified to Stephen’s authenticity as a believer. However, as Stephen begins to see success, certain Jews conspire against Steven to have him arrested. Unable to best him in a public debate, they stir up the crowd by claiming Stephen has spoken blasphemy against Moses and God, even setting up false witnesses to testify they had heard such things. Stephen on these charges is brought before the Sanhedrin to defend himself,



and Stephen essentially delivers a sermon before the council describing how the story of the Old Testament pointed to Jesus, which we will go through.

When we aren't obedient in the small things, we should not expect to see opportunities to do great things. If we aren't willing to lay down our lives in the small things, we shouldn't expect opportunities to lay down our lives in the big things. Stephen clearly embodies this idea within the story of the early church. As we've discussed, Stephen was essentially appointed to do what would be considered by many to be the "grunt" work of the church, attending to the congregation's everyday needs. However, his obedience in these small things demonstrated to God he could be trusted with greater tasks, at which point we see him beginning to perform signs and wonders.

Many of us want to do great signs and wonders like Stephen, but we don't want to serve widows. We want to do great things for God, but we aren't willing to do even the small things. The truth is that Stephen's obedience allowed God to open doors to new opportunities for the power of the Gospel to be made manifest in the world. For Stephen, it began by simply taking the chance to love and serve other people in a small role. Then, God began to perform signs and wonders through him before the crowds. People confronted him trying to shut down his message, but Stephen's wisdom allowed him to overcome his opponents, confronting sin and evil head on. Finally, Stephen now stands before the Sanhedrin and tells them about Jesus.

Obedience in serving leads to confrontation, and confrontation to Gospel proclamation. The small things eventually give way to the big things. For Stephen, his greatest opportunities may have seemed like obstacles, such as having to debate deniers, or being arrested by the Sanhedrin. However, like the Apostles in the same situation before him, Stephen saw his trouble as nothing more than another opportunity to do God's will. You can help build a healthy church and make an impact for the mission when you are willing to pursue obedience in small or big things, even when there are obstacles in the way.

Speaking Truth Advances the Gospel

Asked by the High Priest to provide a defense against the accusations levied against him by the Jews, Stephen gives a remarkable summary of the story of the Old Testament, demonstrating how the Scriptures parallel the Jews' current situation.

1. The Call of Abraham

God first appeared to Abraham and told him to go and settle in a land that would be the eternal possession of his descendants, who would be his chosen people. Abraham's son was Isaac, whose son was Jacob, who himself had twelve sons from whom the original twelve tribes of Israel originate. However, God promised his descendants would first be enslaved.



2. **Joseph in Egypt**

Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, is sold into slavery by his brothers, but eventually rises to prominence in Egypt through God's intervention. When famine sweeps the land, Joseph's preparation allows Egypt to endure, but those living in the surrounding land are in desperate need. Jacob and his remaining sons go to Egypt asking for help where they reunite with Joseph who allows them to remain there.

3. **God Delivers Israel by Moses**

The time God promised to Abraham drew near. The descendants of Jacob multiplied until a new Pharaoh rose to power in Egypt who no longer remembered Joseph, deciding to enslave the Jews. Moses is chosen by God to deliver them from bondage, which he does through the summoning of plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea.

4. **Israel Rebels Against God**

The Jews did not listen to Moses, and for their stubbornness God appointed them to endure the wilderness for forty years before entering the promised land. Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet in the future who they would listen to, but for now, they worshiped false idols. Amos, prophesying during the time of Israel's monarchy, predicted the Jews would be carried off to Babylon for continual unfaithfulness to God that had persisted even to his day.

Stephen ends his monologue by asserting to the Sanhedrin that, like their forefathers, they rejected God and resisted His Holy Spirit. God promised Abraham to be their God and make them into a great nation, but even after delivering them from their oppressor Egypt through signs and wonders, the Jews rejected Him and worshiped other gods. Even decades later, after God had made good on his promise and turned Israel into a powerful kingdom, the Jews continued in their disobedience, leading God to return them to slavery under a new oppressor, Babylon. God eventually delivered them from Babylon as well and returned them to their land, but the Jews wouldn't learn their lesson.

The Jews' rejection of God, which they had historically always done, had now led them to reject Jesus, the very incarnation of God, and crucify him. Modern Israel now faced the same judgment of past days, which would eventually occur when Rome sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD, dispersing the Jews across the world once again. Stephen's words would be taken in one of two ways. Either his accusers would hear the truth and repent, or he would draw the ire of his audience. Unfortunately, those in attendance do not take kindly to Stephen's message, and as a result he is stoned to death. Unlike Jesus, who is brought to the Romans for execution because the Jews have no such authority, Stephen is murdered by an enraged mob illegally.



The text says Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God in his last moments. We've been told before that Jesus would be seated at the right hand of Father after He ascended into Heaven, but here, for the one and only time in Scripture, we see Jesus standing. We don't know for sure why Jesus is standing at Stephen's death, but perhaps He stood to welcome Stephen home, ready to reward Him for his faithfulness even unto death.

We are willing to lay down our life, in the big things and the small things, because the only thing better than comfort, security, fame, fortune, or life itself is being welcomed home by Jesus Christ Himself. We lay down our lives because Jesus is better. Speaking the truth may cost us our lives, but the result is the spreading of the Gospel and the salvation of souls.

At the climax of this tragic tale, Saul of Tarsus is introduced to the audience. Present for Stephen's execution, he will later become perhaps the most prolific Christian to ever live, writing the majority of the New Testament.

BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- What is keeping you from serving the church in the small things? Do you see God's purpose for you being fulfilled in the small things? If not, why not?
- Has obedience to God in the small things ever led to bigger opportunities to serve Him in your life?
- What do you make of Stephen's synopsis of Israel's history and how it related to the Jews' rejection of Jesus in his time? Do you think his criticisms of the Jews could apply to the church today in some way?
- Do you think you would be willing to lay down your life for Jesus and the Gospel like Stephen did? Do you see the reward of Jesus in Heaven as more worth it than the suffering and death you could experience here on earth?