

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. For the first few chapters, there was tremendous positive growth, as the apostles received the Holy Spirit, the church grew, and people were cared for. But lately, things have been getting a lot harder. Last week, in the end of chapter 5, Peter and John preach, are arrested and flogged, but come out praising God, rejoicing in their suffering, because they know that if God loves them and allows them to suffer, there is a good reason. This morning we'll be in chapters 7 & 8, which pick up on a very similar theme as they look mainly at the life and death of Stephen. But first the early church is faced with a different challenge.

Read Acts 6:1-7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

What is happening? As the church grows, the Grecian widows – the Greek-speaking ones – are being overlooked in the daily distribution of bread. Why is this? It could be bias. Before the birth of the church, the Hebraic Jews, who spoke Aramaic, looked down on the Grecian Jews, who spoke Greek. But now in Christ they have become one family, one people. But the old prejudices still remain. As the church grows, one group is being overlooked.

But more likely it's **poor administration**. Maybe there was an expectation early on that the apostles should meet everyone's needs. But as the church grows, it becomes clear that Peter, James, and John can't visit all the widows and care for their needs. Nevertheless, they still need to be visited. And so there is grumbling and complaining building in the church.

Now, thankfully that sort of thing doesn't happen anymore, right? Kidding, of course. Actually, there are plenty of commonalities: people not feeling cared for. People feeling overlooked. People not feel appreciated or feel neglected, and bitter dissension ignites and spreads. And maybe sometimes it's bias. Sometimes it's the unfair expectation that the pastor be the one checking in with everyone and meeting everyone's needs. **But more often than not, like in the early church, it's a result of poor administration.**

The danger is that Satan can use grumbling and complaining to bring disunity and dissension and to take away the focus from spreading the gospel and making disciples and make the focus instead pleasing people.

***John 10:10** - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

If you have a complaint, bring it to our attention. If it is something you can help to improve, volunteer to do it.

What do the apotsles do? They recognize what their role is. They ask the disciples to choose seven men to attend to the needs. Seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom. They delegate.

I have to know my role. The elders have to know their role. The elders and pastor should not apologize for focusing on prayer and the ministry of the word. It doesn't mean social work is less important; it's a matter of calling.

And we need to delegate and raise up leaders to fulfill the other needs.

***Ephesians 4:11-16** - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

This passage shows the need for those with the gift of administration and the heart for the people of the church to assist the elders.

They chose men full of character and wisdom and the Spirit. Faithful with a little, they are given more.

Matthew 25:21 - "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master's joy!'"

We are looking at creating deacons at our church.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 - **Deacons**, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹ They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as **deacons**. ¹¹ In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. ¹² A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. ¹³ Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

What is the result? People are raised up as leaders. The apostles can focus on the priorities. More people are cared for.

Problems happen when people are not cared for. Problem of administration. Problem of leadership. Sometimes it's inability to share or raise up leaders. Sometimes it's a problem of not enough godly people to raise up. But it's a real issue. If you can not care for the church, then either people complain, leave, or the leaders have to neglect the ministry of the Word and prayer to wait on tables.

Moving on to Stephen's story. I'm not going to read the whole thing.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)-- Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." ¹² So they

stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?"

What is going on here? The religious and political elite are unhappy with Stephen's ministry, and so they stir up opposition. They falsely accuse of him of speaking against Moses, the temple, the law, and God.

From 7:2-50 he defends himself by going through the history of Israel, focusing on the time of Abraham, Joseph and the Egyptian exile, Moses and the exodus, and David and Solomon and the temple. Let me summarize his purpose:

- 1) **God's presence is not limited to any particular place** – he called Abram in heathen Mesopotamia. He was with Joseph as a slave in Egypt. He came to Moses in the desert of Midian. No building can confine him. He is on the move, always with his people, calling them to follow Him. He quotes Is 66:1-2:

. ⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?"

- 2) **The whole OT points to Jesus the Messiah** – He is not speaking against the law and the temple, but showing them that they are signs pointing to the real thing, Jesus. Jesus has fulfilled the law and replaced the temple.

Galatians 3:24-25 - *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.*

Hebrews 10:11-12 - *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*

He is more biblical than they were. They are the ones who have resisted God.

3) He is not the one who is speaking against God; they are

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- ⁵³ you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Once again, another disciples is bold and unafraid. The real one who is against God is the one who does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

What happens next?

⁵⁴ When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. ^{NIV} **Acts 8:1** And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

The crowd lynches him, and he looks up to heaven and sees the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand. This is the place of rule. Jesus is sovereign over it all. He is standing – he is advocating for Stephen.

Romans 8:33-34 - Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the **right hand** of God and is also **interceding** for us.

FF Bruce – Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God.

Matthew 10:32-33 - "Whoever **acknowledges** me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

Like Jesus, Stephen has been rejected by the court of human opinion. But in the real court, the heavenly throne room, Stephen has been approved.

Look at how he dies – like Jesus, full of grace, praying for his executioners. He accuses them. They kill him. He dies with honor and grace, trusting in Jesus and forgiving them.

Look at the impact it has. Remember what I said last week – they rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. They knew God loved them, and if he allowed them to suffer, it was because he was going to use it to bring salvation to others. The same thing happens here. Saul is there, who becomes saved and the apostle Paul. And as a result, a great persecution breaks out. God sends the church out around the world to fulfill the great commission. Stephen's death, while tragic, is used for incredible good. He is counted worthy to suffer in the footsteps of Jesus.

This passage is a challenge to use your life for His glory, to serve Him. And if you suffer, praise God in the midst of the pain that He will use it for His kingdom and for His glory.