

Bible Study: Acts

(Part 3-Chapters 5-7)

by Gary T. Panell

Chapter 5

(1-11) This account of Ananias and Sapphira is a sad one for sure. We wish these things would not happen in the Church, but they do. The very fact that Christians still have a free will, even after they are saved, makes it possible for sin to be in the Church. As hard as this reality is to accept, it is true. "Luke does not try to gloss over the situation but relates the event with black colors.

"1, 2. Sapphira in the Aramaic tongue means *beautiful*. Like Barnabas, she and her husband sold a **piece of property**. Ananias, with his wife's knowledge, determined upon the plan of bringing only part of the money to the apostles, but pretending that they were giving all. **3.** We are not told how Peter recognized this deception; it was probably by divine illumination. Peter charged Ananias not with deceiving him but with attempting to deceive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is obviously a person, and verse 4 shows that the Holy Spirit is also God.

["In Acts 5:3, Peter said that Ananias had lied to the Holy Ghost: in Acts 5:4, he said that Ananias had lied to God. Thus, God and the Holy Ghost are used synonymously, showing clearly that the Holy Spirit is God." (*The Defender's Bible*)]

"4. The program of sharing wealth in the early church was a purely voluntary one and not compulsory. While the land remained in Ananias' possession, it was his alone to dispose of as he chose; and even after he had sold it, the money was his to do with as he pleased. Ananias' sin did not consist in his keeping back the money, but in his pretending a complete consecration to God while deliberately keeping back part of the money.

"The same fate that struck Ananias overtook Sapphira, and she fell down and expired. There is no reason to believe that Ananias and Sapphira were not saved persons. Their physical death was a divine judgment upon them which did not involve the question of their salvation. The very fact that they were believers determined the enormity of their sin. They were pretending to "surrender all" but were deliberately holding back from God. This is a sin that can be committed only by a Christian." (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*)

It is possible for Christians to sin, even a sin unto death: "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead* to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is sin *leading* to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not *leading* to death." (1 John 5:16-17) We should not take lightly these warnings for Christians. I know of Christians, I believe, who went to heaven before they should have, as a result of their willful sin. Now the passage goes on to say, "We know that whoever is born of God does not sin

[practice sin]; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him." (1 John 5:18)

We believe that Christians are to live a victorious Christian life; that does not mean that they never sin, but that they don't want to sin (Look at our Romans 7-8 study). However, they do sin and that is why we need these verses: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." (1 John 1:8-10)

I have met people on both sides of the spectrum concerning the sin issue. Some Christians claim that they never sin, and others are afraid that they have committed the unpardonable sin. First, if you say that you have no sin and are perfect, you are lying because God says no one is perfect, not even Christians. Usually these people redefine sin as the "big ones" they think, like murder, adultery, and so on, but God does not make these distinctions in His word.

The problem with this theory, that we can be perfect before we get to heaven, is that it just is not true, even though we are to be perfect as He is perfect; this is a goal that we will not totally reach until we get to heaven. That is why we need 1 John 1:9, because we do have a need, as Christians, to confess our sins. Peter gave Ananias and his wife Sapphira an opportunity to repent, but they didn't take it, so they died for their unconfessed sin.

The other case, where a Christian thinks he or she has committed the unpardonable sin, they have not, because they are under conviction of sin. If they had committed the unpardonable sin, they would not even be concerned about it, they would be so hardened. The mere fact that they are being convicted by the Holy Spirit shows that they can still be forgiven. The unpardonable sin is actually rejecting the Holy Spirit's convicting of a person of their need of salvation. Once a person has died it is too late to repent and receive Christ's pardon for salvation.

I believe, though, that we will see Ananias and Sapphira in heaven. You see, God has forgiven us in Christ, but we will have to give an account of our lives when we stand before Him. Many Christians in the Church have sinned like these two did, and many of these Christians have not died immediately. Why is this? It is because these two were used as examples of what God feels about us thinking that we can deceive Him. He knows everything we do, say, and think, so we need to be careful of our motives!

Before we take the Holy Communion we need to examine ourselves, St. Paul says. "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep [have died]. For if we would judge ourselves [1 John 1:9], we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world." (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

(11) God is a holy God, someone has noted that the angels in Isaiah 6 are not saying "love," "love," "love," when they are worshipping before God, but are saying, "Holy," "Holy," "Holy!" God wants us to live holy lives for our own well being and for His name's sake, because that is whose we are; we are His name's sake. "He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (Psalm 23:3b)

"This event brought great awe and fear of God into the church and exercised a purifying influence. Here for the first time in Acts the word for church, *ekklēsia*, appears. It means, **called out**, and refers to the calling out of Greek citizens from their homes to the public assembly for civic purposes. The word is taken over by the Greek OT and used of Israel as the people of God. Its use in the NT therefore indicates that the Church is the new people of God. This word is never used of a building. It designates both the church at large (5:11; 9:31; 20:28) and local congregations of believers (11:26; 13:1).

(12) "The early Christians did not have their own building for worship but met in Solomon's Porch, which bordered the east side of the vast temple area." (The Wycliffe Bible Commentary) Usually they met in homes or rented buildings as we will see in other parts of Acts.

"**Sings and wonders** characterized the ministry of the early Church and are equally intended to be expected in and through the Church today. [1 Corinthians 12: 1-31, we have a study on this in our Corinthians commentary.]

"**One Heart and One Soul**, POWER OF UNITY. The early church grew rapidly as 'the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved' (Acts 2:27). In 4:32, 33, it is reported that the growing multitude of believers were experiencing a profound dimension of spiritual unity. First, they were 'of one heart,' which is a description in the original Greek, meaning 'in tune' or 'in sync' with one another. To put it another way, they were all going the same way, spiritually together. Second, they were of 'one soul' (sometimes translated as 'one mind'). This has a wonderfully deep meaning in the original Greek. It literally means 'to breathe' or 'to breathe spiritually together.' The results of this quality of spiritual unity were both powerful and practical." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

"The tragic and terrible weakness of the contemporary church is that its people are not rock solid in their faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ. Their leaders are so eager to pack their sanctuaries with happy people, so keen to come to an easy accommodation with the world, so willing to be soft on sin and tolerant of almost any lifestyle, that the church has almost no impact on our culture.

"If we are going to shape our society to serve God and honor Him, it will not be at the ballot box or through the political powers per se. It will be by the relentless power of God's own gracious Spirit becoming supremely in control of individual believers who are firm in their devotion to Christ. People, plain people who stand on their faith in our Father, will shape society and change our civilization for good more than will ten thousand, big-time TV campaigns with all their glitz and glamour.

"God is not looking for smooth, slick communicators. He is looking for a few noble souls who will stand firm for Him, who will not flinch before their foes, who will not fear no matter how much others may rant and rave in rage. Let me name but a few of these dauntless ones:

Joseph in Egypt,
Daniel in Babylon,
Paul in Greece and Italy,
Augustine in Africa,
Florence Nightingale in the Crimea,
Wilberforce in Britain,
Abraham Lincoln in North America.
It takes courage to be firm and fearless.

It means a man or woman must be bold for God and His Word.

It demands that we be different from the crowd.

But our Father honors those who honor Him!"

(*What Makes LIFE Worth Living* by the author of *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, W. Phillip Keller)

(13) The unsaved are watching us all the time to see if our salvation is real. Sometimes they may say things like, "Oh, it is just a phase they are going through, they will get over it." Also, even though they may respect us they are afraid of what others will think of them if they get saved, or they are afraid of the persecution it will bring. Don't give up, it may take years, but if we keep praying for them and keep living for the Lord they, in many cases, will come to know Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

Here is a true account of this very same thing happening recently in India: "The 105-year-old man stood before his fellow villagers. The people respected the elderly man and stood at rapt attention, waiting to hear what he had to say. As the words began to tumble out of his mouth, the people knew something was drastically different.

"My dear friends and villagers, so many years I misunderstood Christianity and I persecuted the Christians a lot," he began. "But all these years I had no peace in my heart. Then I realized my sins and I came to know that only Jesus Christ could forgive my sins, and give me peace of mind. So whether you kill me or not, I am going to take baptism."

"The people were stunned at his bold confession of faith. They still could hardly believe their eyes when the centenarian and his family chose to be baptized and became active members of the local Gospel for Asia Believers Church.

"GFA leaders in Tripura, where this man lives, were not surprised at the turn of events. They had been fasting and praying that God would remove the veil of opposition from the man's eyes. Whether old or young, former persecutors of Christians are today embracing the faith they once resisted—thanks to the prayers of God's people." ([Gospel for Asia](#) News Update December 2006)

(14) Now at this point in history so many were getting saved that the Apostles lost track of how many there were. "Estimates of the size of the Church by 250 [AD] vary between five and twelve percent of the population of the [Roman] Empire." (*Christianity Through The Centuries*)

(15-16) "so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed." (Notice Peter didn't take up an offering here, or even say anything about money!)

God used special miracles to confirm His message to the people of that time at the beginning of the Church Age, but that is not to say that God cannot or will not do this type of thing again. The book of Acts is the blue-print for the Church, but we also need to understand that the foundation was laid by Jesus and the Twelve Apostles along with St. Paul. So you don't lay down another foundation after the building is going.

"For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:9-11)

"Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.' And they prayed and said, 'You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.' And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles." (Acts 1: 21-26) So today we do not have an apostleship as it was in the early Church, but there are apostles in the sense of missionaries, look at our Ephesians 4 study.

"**The shadow of Peter** was not magic nor was it intended to provide a formula. Sometimes God uses physical objects as a point at which our faith may make a kind of link between the seen and the unseen (see 19:12). The bread and cup of Communion, the water of baptism, and the anointing oil (James 5:14) are some examples." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

That being said, some today are making money out of sending pieces of cloth that have been prayed over, and they add, healing will follow if you send us money, but (they imply) "no money, no healing." How far from the truth, and how perverted are such people who would teach and preach such things! All I can say is that they will be judged for such a perversion of the precious, glorious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! Salvation is a free gift, and healing is also a free gift!

In the Old Testament there is an example of someone making profit out of healing and what happened to him:

Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper. Then Naaman went with his horses and chariot, and he stood at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent a messenger to him. So he [Naaman] went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

And he returned to the man of God, he and all his aides, and came and stood before him; and he said, 'Indeed, now I know that *there* is no God in all the earth, except in Israel; now therefore, please take a gift from your servant.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will receive nothing.' And he urged him to take *it*, but he refused. Then he said to him, 'Go in peace.' So he departed from him a short distance.

But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, 'Look, my master has spared Naaman this Syrian, while not receiving from his hands what he brought; but *as* the LORD lives, I will run after him and take something from him.

So Naaman said, 'Please, take two talents.' And he urged him, and bound two changes of garments, and handed *them* to two of his servants; and they carried *them* on ahead of him. When he came to the

citadel, he took *them* from their hand, and stored *them* away in the house; then he let the men go, and they departed.

Now he went in and stood before his master. Elisha said to him, 'Where *did* you go, Gehazi? And he said, 'Your servant did not go anywhere.' Then he said to him, 'Did not my heart go *with you* when the man turned back from his chariot to meet you? *Is it* time to receive money and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyard, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever.' And he went out from his presence leprous, as *white* as snow." (2 Kings 5: 1-27)

Here is but one example of the perversion from our day of what God intended for healing gifts, and how they should be used: "----- [Name of a person] then promised that anyone suffering from an extreme financial crisis need only carry the prayer cloth in a purse, wallet, or checkbook to receive a financial breakthrough. There was one small catch: Before the cloth could work, it had to be sent back to -----. The prayer cloth, according to -----, presently 'does not carry or contain any special anointing or qualities. It is just a simple piece of plain cloth, but in a few days (if you act in faith RIGHT NOW) it can become a MIRACLE PRAYER CLOTH.' But ----- had one more suggestion: When you return the cloth, be sure to send money. As ----- puts it, '*Receiving follows giving.*'" (*Christianity in Crisis*)

The Church has not seen the likes of such teaching since Martin Luther confronted John Tetzel for the selling of indulgences. Look what was happening in Luther's time: "The prior of the Dominican convent at Leipzig, John Tetzel, was selling these indulgences. When he entered Juterbog where Luther's people went to see and hear him, he had the papal bull, announcing the indulgence, carried on velvet cloth at the head of a procession.

"With great pomp and ceremony he marched through the streets of the town to the place of preaching. There, in unbelievable boldness, he promised to the Saxons that they could buy release from all punishment imposed by church law; they also could buy release from the penances they must do in purgatory for their sins.

"With mock pathos and brutal hypocrisy, he painted for the benefit of his hearers the sufferings of their dead relatives in purgatory and told them point-blank that they could release their loved ones from suffering by paying a little money. Duped by these promises, the unlettered Germans whom Luther looked upon as his sheep, believed the great reward of character thus could be bought." (*Heroes of the Faith, Martin Luther*, Edwin P. Booth)

So it is today, some are preaching another gospel, and some are "selling the gospel." Healing comes all of "faith" and faith in God's power, not faith in faith! Nor does God charge for salvation or healing! "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely." (Revelation 22:17)

(17-18) Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyr is often the seed of the Church." "Such rapid growth was not without much opposition on the part of the Jews. Quickly the ecclesiastical authorities realized that Christianity offered a threat to their prerogatives as interpreters and priests of the law, and they rallied their forces to combat Christianity. Persecution came first from a politico-ecclesiastical body, the Sanhedrin, which, with Roman permission, supervised the civil and religious life of the state. Peter and

John were hailed before that august body at least twice and forbidden to preach the Gospel, but they refused to accede to the request." (*Christianity Through the Centuries*, Cairns)

(19-21) Men of this world and enemies of the cross think they can physically stop the spread of the Gospel into the entire world. Whatever they do will only 'backfire' in their faces, here they think by locking up some of the apostles they will stop the spread of the good news of Christ's resurrection. This only makes Christ's disciples more determined than ever that they are walking in the truth and light, while the Sadducees "are sad you see" because they are walking in darkness.

"5:17 Sadducees. Strangely, the chief priests were all members of the Sadducees, the religious party which (like the pagan nations around them denied the doctrine of resurrection. Therefore, they were increasingly furious at the effectiveness of the powerful preaching of the resurrection by the apostles (Acts 4:33; 6:7). **5:20 Go, stand.** Regardless of opposition or difficulties the Lord expects His people to stand-that is, to take a stand, once and for all (Ephesians 6:13, 14)-and to speak-to speak all the words of this life, just as the apostles 'spoke the word of God with boldness' (Acts 4:31)" (*The Defender's Study Bible*)

In this case the apostles were not in common prison long because an angel took them out. They didn't let fear take hold of them, but they went right back to work preaching the gospel in the temple. The high priest, after having breakfast decided to have the apostles for lunch, but he was to have a big surprise instead!

Angels are spoken of throughout the Bible; actually there are more references to angels in the New Testament than in the Old. They are always helping believers. They were with Christ at His birth, resurrection, and ascension. Now we see them at work in the ministry of the early Church. Do you suppose they have stopped ministering to the saints? No, I don't think so, they are always doing their job, even though we don't see them, at least we don't think we see them. "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so *doing* some have unwittingly entertained angels." (Hebrews 13:2)

God delivers some, and others He allows to stay in jail. John Bunyan spent something like twelve years in an English jail, however, as a result of that time he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has brought multitudes to the saving grace of Christ. Paul himself spent many years in jail, "We need to bloom where we are planted," as someone has said.

At that time, at the inception of the Church, there were just a few suffering for the Lord Jesus Christ; today many around the world suffer in prisons and in many other horrible ways. There is probably more persecution today than at any other time in Church history. One reason for so many being persecuted is because there are more Christians than there has ever been before.

Here are just a few of the countries where Christians are put in prison and tortured for their faith:

China, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar (Burma), Brunei and Malaysia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Northern Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Northern Nigeria, Cuba, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza Strip, Chiapas (Mexico), Colombia, Turkey, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, parts of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mindanao (Philippines), Comoro Islands.

"Richard Wurmbrand learned firsthand that although you can imprison the body, no one can bind the soul. He later learned his solitary cell was adjacent to the toilet (if you could call it that) where prisoners would line up each morning. He began to shout through the wall. "God is good." "Jesus died for your sins." "Believe in Jesus." "He is your only hope." "Hallelujah!"

Richard became known as the "Hallelujah Pastor" and his reputation spread throughout the prisons in Romania-an unseen and unnamed pastor who shouted through concrete walls to bring hope to others.

Richard spent a total of 14 years in prison, three of those years in solitary confinement. After being freed and coming to the West, he started The Voice of the Martyrs (see our web sites) in October of 1967. This year (2007) marks [their] 40th anniversary." (*The Voice of the Martyrs* January 2007) If you do not get their magazine I highly recommend it, so you can keep in touch with what God is doing around the world through Christians who are suffering greatly for their faith.

"Doing the work of God is dangerous-not doing it is more dangerous." (Sabina Wurmbrand) To view a video reenactment by Richard Wurmbrand in his prison cell, visit www.persecution.com. Go to media rooms and enter the passcode "Wurmbrand" for more on Richard Wurmbrand's life.

(26) These religious leaders should have feared the Lord instead of the people!

(27-28) You will remember that the Jews cried out, "His blood *be* on us and on our children." when they wanted Jesus crucified. Now they seem to have forgotten what they had said earlier or maybe they were bothered by it. At any rate, they are still responsible for Jesus death, along with all the rest of the world, since we are all sinners, and He died for our sins!

However, the Jewish nation does have the blood of Jesus on their hands, and until they ask God the Father's forgiveness for this they will not have God's protection or blessing as they had before. Once they do ask God the Father to forgive them, and ask Jesus to save them, He will. He will forgive and save them as individuals and as a nation. Then He will bless them, beyond what the world could ever fathom!

(29) "**5:29 ought to obey God.** Christians are commanded to 'be subject unto higher powers' (Romans 13:1) and to 'submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake' (1 Peter 2:13), with this one exception. They had been commanded not to 'teach in this name' (Acts 5:28), but God had said: 'Stand and speak' (Acts 5:20). God's commands take priority, but they should be His commands, not our extensions of those commands." (*The Defender's Study Bible*)

(30) The disciples did not mince any words when they said to the false religious leaders, "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree."

(31-32) "The gift of **the Holy Spirit**, whom Luke notes is given to all believers at the time of salvation, bears witness to the reality of the exaltation of Jesus."

(33-42) **Gamaliel**, Paul's former **teacher** (22:3), did not see Jesus as the Messiah, but his counsel to the Sanhedrin was certainly influenced by divine providence. Luke's more subtle message is that even the highest levels of Jewish leadership had to admit that they had no valid reason for resisting the early church." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

"Compare Acts 2:37. The Gospel, when preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, often convicts or enrages." (*New Scofield Reference Edition*)

"5:34 Gamaliel, a Pharisee rather than a Sadducee like the chief priests and well instructed in the Scriptures, had been the teacher of young Paul before the latter became a Christian (Acts 22:3)

"5:39 ye cannot overthrow it. Gamaliel may well have known Nicodemus, who was also a member of the council, a Pharisee, and a respected teacher (John 3:1, 10). He must have been profoundly impressed by the conversion and devotion of Nicodemus to Jesus, and then by the empty tomb and the reports of Christ's resurrection. He had good reason to fear that suppression of the Christians might indeed be fighting against God." (*The Defender's Study Bible*)

"In the above incident, Dr. Griffith-Thomas notices three representative forces-the spirit of error (the Sadducees); the spirit of compromise (Gamaliel); the spirit of truth (Peter)." (Myer Pearlman)

"38, 39 Gamaliel counseled the Sanhedrin to trust God's providence. If God was in the movement, it would prosper; otherwise it would fail."

"40 Gamaliel's influence was so great that he carried the decision of the Sanhedrin. A minor punishment of beating was inflicted, probably with thirty-nine blows (2 Cor. 11:24), for disobeying the Sanhedrin's earlier command.

"41, 42 The apostles were by no means discouraged, for they considered it an honor to suffer for the name of Jesus. They continued their activities of teaching and preaching of Jesus as the Messiah, both publicly in the Court of the Gentiles in the temple and in their Christian gatherings in their private homes." (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*)

"Both public services in the temple and small group meetings in private homes were employed for the nurturing of believers. Luke establishes both types of meetings as a paradigm, vital to the life of any local congregation (2:46)." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

Chapter 6

(1) "Up to this point, the apostles had given no evidence of a purpose to carry the Gospel into all the world but had stayed in Jerusalem witnessing to the Jews. Luke now relates the beginnings of expansion of the church throughout Judea and Samaria, which was occasioned by the persecution that arose around Stephen. This expansion was accomplished not by the vision and purpose of the church but by the providential act of God in scattering the believers. To explain this persecution, Luke first relates how Stephen came into a position of prominence as one of the seven.

"Choice of the Seven. 6:1-7. The Church in its earliest days had no formal organization and no officials or leaders except the apostles. The numerical growth of the church and the rise of problems in its internal organization and the choice of additional leaders or ministers.

"Jews who were natives of Palestine spoke primarily Aramaic; but Jews who had lived in the Mediterranean world outside of Palestine spoke Greek and often did not know Aramaic. Many of these

Diaspora Jews returned to Jerusalem to live, and some of them were converted and came into the church.

"A contention now arose between the Greek-speaking Christians (Grecians) [Hellenists] and the Aramaic-speaking Christians (Hebrews) because it appeared that favoritism for the latter was being shown in the distribution of food to the widows. Widows were persons without any means of support, who were provided with the bare necessities of life by the Christian community.

(2) "The twelve apostles called together the entire church and pointed out that this responsibility for the care of the poor had become such a burden that they found themselves devoting most of their time to this material ministry and neglecting the ministry of the Word. Such neglect was not right. ["The words 'ministration' and 'serve' are cognates in the Greek to the word which later became rendered as 'deacon.'" (*The Defender's Study Bible*)]

(3-4) "They recommended that the distribution of food be placed under the direction of seven Spirit-filled men of good reputation. [The Apostles were looking for three things in leadership: 1. Men of good reputation 2. Full of the Holy Spirit 3. Wisdom] The apostles would then be free to devote themselves to the ministry of prayer and of preaching and teaching the Word.

(5) "Stephen was among the seven men chosen. All seven had Greek names and apparently were drawn from the Greek wing of the church. ["The murmuring had come from the Greek-speaking segment of the church; so those elected to care for the work came from their number so as to represent their interests fairly.

Only Stephen and Philip of the seven receive further notice (Stephen, 6:8-7:60; Philip, 8:5-40; 21:8-9). From Antioch, a *convert* to Judaism. It is significant that a proselyte was included in the number and that Luke points out his place of origin as Antioch, the city to which the gospel was soon to be taken and which was to become the 'headquarters' for the forthcoming Gentile missionary effort. (*The NIV Study Bible*)]

(6) "The church at large selected these seven men, but the apostles approved the selection and appointed them to their office. The seven were then ordained to their office by the imposition of the apostles' hands. This laying on of hands was an OT custom (Gen. 48:13 ff.; Lev. 1:4; Num. 27:23), which was also practiced by the Jews when men were admitted to the Sanhedrin.

"It was taken over by the early church for the ordination of these leaders. A preliminary qualification, however, was that the seven be filled with the Holy Spirit. Aside from the apostles, these seven were the first officials in the church. By tradition they have been designated deacons; but they are not so designated in the text.

"The solution of this problem added to the effectiveness of the Christian testimony, and even many priests believed." (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*)

"The laying on of hands sometimes accompanied prayer (Mt. 19:13, 15) and was also used as a sign of healing (Mk. 5:23; 6:5, etc.), a symbol for the impartation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17, 19; 9:17; 19:6), and a token of ordination for special service (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14, etc.)." (*New Scofield Reference Edition*)

(7) The Lord showed He was pleased with the resolution of the problem by adding to the Church new believers. I have known of churches that grew very quickly through evangelism or other forms of church growth, but then they just collapsed because they were not organized, nor did they have trained people to teach the new converts. So here again we see the blueprint for the Church.

"One of a series of progress reports given periodically throughout the book of Acts (1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). A large number of priests. Though involved by lineage and life service in the priestly observances of the old covenant, they accepted the preaching of the apostles, which proclaimed a sacrifice that made the old sacrifices unnecessary (Heb 8:13; 10:1-4, 11-14) became obedient to the faith. Responded to the commands of the gospel. To believe is to obey God. Faith itself is obedience, but faith also produces obedience (Ro 1:1:5; Eph 2:8-10; Jas 2:14-26)." (*The NIV Study Bible*)

(8) Notice also that miracles were the norm in the early Church. Are they the norm today or the exception? If they are the exception what has happened? Has God changed? Or is it that we have changed?!

(9) "[Stephen] was bearing witness to the Messiahship of Jesus in the Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem, particularly in one that was attended by *Freedmen*

(RSV; Libertines, AV) who had formerly lived in the four places named. A synagogue was composed of ten or more Jews who met together for the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures. An exaggerated tradition says there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem." (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*).

"The 'Libertines' [Freedmen] were freedmen, formerly slaves. All of these groups were Jewish immigrants to Jerusalem from other lands, who had evidently formed their own synagogue. As such, they were quite legalistic and very zealous of the Mosaic traditions, especially the temple worship. They may well have immigrated to Jerusalem for this very reason." (*The Defender's Study Bible*)

"*Freedmen*. Persons who had been freed from slavery. [But not from the slavery of sin!] They came from different Hellenistic areas. Cyrene. The chief city in Libya and north Africa, halfway between Alexandria and Carthage. One of its population groups was Jewish. Alexandria. Capital of Egypt and second only to Rome in the empire. Two out of five districts in Alexandria were Jewish.

"Cilicia. A Roman province in the southeast corner of Asia Minor adjoining Syria. Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul, was one of its principal towns. Asia. A Roman province in the western part of Asia Minor. Ephesus, where Paul later ministered for a few years, was its capital. These men began to argue. Since Saul was from Tarsus, this may have been the synagogue he attended, and he may have been among those who argued with Stephen." (*The NIV Study Bible*)

(10) When a Christian is testifying for the Lord this is called witnessing. It will involve a spiritual warfare! Every time we tell others that Jesus is the only way to heaven we will suffer persecution.

All of this was prophesied by Jesus that it would happen. "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute *you*, delivering *you* up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.

Therefore settle *it* in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist." (Luke 21:12-15)

(11-14) "*blasphemy* against Moses and against God. Since Stephen declared that the worship of God was no longer to be restricted to the temple (7:48-49), his opponents twisted these words to trump up an accusation that Stephen was attacking the temple, the law, Moses and, ultimately, God." (*The NIV Study Bible*)

"6:13 *false witnesses*. Stephen had been accused of blasphemy against the temple and the law, but even though the false witnesses had distorted his message, Stephen did not attempt to defend himself. Instead he probably presented the same type of message to the council as he had been preaching in the synagogue, stressing that the principles of God's plan for Israel had been established long before the temple system, and that the Abrahamic Covenant centered in the promised Messiah, as did the preaching of the prophets. But Israel had rejected God's Word at every stage, had killed the prophets, corrupted the law and finally murdered the Messiah when He came." (*The Defender's Study Bible*)

"The same argument had been leveled at Jesus (Matt. 26:60, 61). Actually, the coming of Christ meant the end of the temple order, which was the foundation and centerpiece of Judaism." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

(15) "And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel." (NKJV) God was preparing Stephen for a grand entrance into his heavenly home, as He does for all His Christian martyrs! "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trials of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented-

Of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains. In dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith." (Hebrews 11:35b-40)

I have had Christians tell me that if Stephen had had enough faith he would not have had to suffer stoning. This could not be further from the truth, just the opposite is true, Hebrews 11: 35b says, "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection."

Not only that, we see the heavens opened, ready to receive Stephen with open arms! No, there is no lack of faith here. "But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:55-56)

Don't believe for a minute, this foolish teaching that Christians don't have to suffer if they have enough faith! What does Holy Scripture say? "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified." (1 Peter 4:12-14) (NKJV)

Chapter 7

(1-59) "Stephen's lengthy address is more than a rebuttal of the charges against him. Rather than defending himself, he brought an indictment against his accusers. Instead of manifesting a true zeal for the temple and the Law in their opposition to the gospel, the Jews were displaying the same rebellious spirit of unbelief that characterized their forebears who resisted the purposes of God. In a skillful review of Israel's history, he also concludes that God's presence is not limited to a geographical place nor to a particular people." (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*)

"Running through his discourse are the following thoughts:

"1. Divine revelation is progressive. Stephen had been accused of preaching that the Law of Moses would pass away (6:14). Though his words had been misquoted and their meaning perverted, Stephen had evidently been preaching the passing of the age of law, and the ushering in of the age of grace. So he shows that God has always been giving new revelations of Himself.

"First He revealed Himself to Abraham, through the institution of the altar; to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai; then to Israel, through the tabernacle, and finally through the temple. Stephen shows that God's dwelling in the tabernacle and temple was only symbolical (vv. 48, 49). God now dwells in and reveals Himself in reality through a new institution-the Church.

"2. He had been accused of declaring that the temple would be destroyed (6:14). He shows that the temple is not the only holy place, but that God reveals Himself anywhere He finds an open heart. He revealed Himself to Abraham in Mesopotamia (v.2); to Joseph in Egypt (vv. 9-12); to Moses in Egypt (v. 25), and in the wilderness (vv. 30-33, 38).

"3. Israel has always rejected God's first offer of mercy, suffered for it, and then has accepted it the second time. They rejected Joseph and Moses the first time, but accepted them the second time (vv. 9-13, 24-35). In like manner they have rejected Jesus but after they have suffered, they will accept His second offer." (*Through the Bible Book by Book* by Myer Pearlman)

Stephen concluded this with these two charges: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers." (7:51-52 *NKJV*)

"And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy." (2 Chronicles 15-16 *NKJV*)

"Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands." (Nehemiah 9:30 *NKJV*)

Just like Jesus, Stephen, with his last breath forgave those who sinned against him. "Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.'" (Luke 23:34) "And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on

God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this he fell asleep." (7:59-60 NKJV) Sleep is a metaphor for death.

Stephen's prayer was answered in Saul. ".and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." (7:58) ".although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." (1Timothy 1:13-14)

Stephen was the first in the Church to be martyred, but since him millions upon millions of Christians have suffered for their precious Lord Jesus Christ.

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' and a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matthew 10:34-39)

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