

# Acts Part 1 Study Guide

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## Lesson 6: The Martyrdom of Stephen – Acts 6-7

### 1. A Second Major Internal Threat – Acts 6:1-7

- A. *The choice*: The explosive growth of the church gives occasion for internal discord: the charge of discrimination by Hebrew (orthodox Jews) brethren against the Hellenists (Jews influenced by the Greek culture) relative to the care of their widows.
1. Though volatile and threatening, the apostles did not want the dispute to distract them from spiritual matters, so they sought for spiritual men to handle it.
  2. Describe the kind of work the apostles were focused on:
  3. Direction is given for the “multitude of the disciples” to choose their own leaders in dealing with this matter (6:2, 5). What kind of men were they to look for?
- B. *The appointment*: The apostles are presented with the seven chosen men, and they appoint them to the task through prayer and laying on of hands.
1. What purpose would be served by such a public appointment?
  2. Consistent with Luke’s literary style, he introduces a matter that will be more fully developed later. He mentions the laying on of the apostles’ hands, then with no further elucidation tells of miracles being worked by two of the objects of this blessing: first Stephen (6:8), then Philip (8:6-7). The significant connection between these two items will be explained in Acts 8.
- C. Who are these seven men? They are not specifically called “deacons” (a transliteration of the Greek *diakonos*), though the verb form is found in 6:2 (“serve tables” = (*diakonein trapezais*). Note that they were to be “*over this business*” (6:3); that is, the apostles delegated the responsibility of effectively handling the matter to them.

### 2. Another Major External Threat Arises from Success – Acts 6:8-15

- A. Stephen represents the gradual broadening of the apostles’ influence to others. Until now the focus has been upon the “apostles’ doctrine,” the apostles’ teaching, the miracles worked by the apostles, the decisions of the apostles. But Stephen is not only a responsible and capable man in the matter of the widows’ distribution; he is also a man of great teaching and debating ability – 6:8-10.
- B. Similar to the trial of Jesus, Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and saddled with charges from false witnesses (6:11-15). Note, as in the case of Jesus (Matthew 26:61), the Jews are sensitive to any suggestion of the temple being threatened.

### 3. Stephen’s Defense and Death – Acts 7:1-60

A. It can be difficult to precisely analyze the specific purpose of Stephen's references to Old Testament history, for it appears that the situation rapidly deteriorates and results in his death before he finishes. Consider the following suggestions:

1. 7:1-8 – Stephen reminds them that Abraham received great blessings from God while yet uncircumcised and living in a far away land. The Jews had become so proud of their “property” and saw Palestine, the temple, etc. as the be-all and end-all of relationship with God. But God desired for Israel to “*serve Me in this place.*” Were they, in fact, now doing so? And what if Israel has itself become the oppressors of the people of God (7:7)? What will God do to them? Stephen also emphasizes the working of God through these early developments of the Abrahamic program. Is He now working in a way they refuse to acknowledge?
2. 7:9-16 – The OT tutorial now moves on to the period of Egyptian bondage and the blessing that came to Israel via Joseph's position. One possible parallel is that Stephen is subtly tying the jealousy and obstinacy of Joseph's brothers to the behavior of the Jewish leadership toward Jesus. In both cases, the one formerly despised and forsaken is the very one through whom deliverance comes.
3. 7:17-36 – Stephen reviews the details of Moses' rise to leadership as Israel's deliverer. He emphasizes the efforts of Moses to assert himself and secure the freedom of his people by his own initiative and efforts. But this had resulted in disaster, and Moses needed to learn the lessons of humility and submission to the will of God. He was not sufficient by his own power to accomplish the purposes of God. It seems that the theme of stubbornness and rebellion is developing in Stephen's address – and perhaps the Sanhedrin is beginning to catch on.
4. 7:37-43 – Stephen now takes a more pointed step in his presentation. He documents Israel's rebellion against Moses and God. In spite of the fact that Moses had direct interaction with the Angel of God on Mt. Sinai, that Moses had received “living oracles” from heaven, that God had appointed him His designated leader and given him unmistakable credentials, the people rejected him and appealed to the weaker Aaron to lead them back into their former state of captivity. *Incredible!*
5. 7:44-50 – Though Stephen follows the OT history of the tabernacle and temple, he is also indicating that the legitimacy of each depended upon the instructions of God. The tabernacle had no fixed location for years as Israel carried it about in the wilderness. Finally, God instructed that a permanent house be established by Solomon in Canaan. But even so, argues Stephen, one should not conclude that God is *dependent* upon such a physical structure. God has shown that His representative place of presence among men has changed from time to time, and so it has changed again. Apparently, however, Stephen does not get the chance to finish this thought.

B. For reasons not quite clear from Luke's narrative, Stephen's address takes a sharp turn toward harsh rebuke – 7:51-53.

1. What terminology does Stephen use to describe these Jewish leaders?
2. How does he describe their behavior relative to their ancestors?
3. How does he describe them relative to the Holy Spirit, Jesus and angels?

C. For the Sanhedrin, a body of men who have been boiling and seething ever since the resurrection, who are helplessly watching gradual encroachments upon their territory, who have lost many of their own priests to this new movement, who have seen commoners openly resist their authority and defy their orders, Stephen's remarks are the last straw.

1. They rush upon the accused with murderous rage, losing the control that had been maintained by fear of public opinion in the case of Jesus.
2. Stephen is given a vision of the exalted Lord, perhaps as a final testimony to these rebellious Jews before his execution, and perhaps to encourage him during the violent end of his life.
3. Again, note Luke's literary device of introducing a character who will be later developed: "*And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul*" (7:58).

### **Questions:**

1. What similarity is there between Acts 6:1-7 and Num 11?
2. What effects follow the wise handling of this matter (Acts 6:7)?
3. How would prophecy have been violated if the Sanhedrin had done to Jesus what they did to Stephen?
4. What connection might one make between Acts 7:48-50 and Acts 17:24? (cf. Acts 7:58)
5. Considering the terms "filled" or "full" as found in Acts 2:2, 4; 3:10; 4:8, 31; 5:3, 17, 28; 6:3, 5, 8 and 7:55, what observations would you make concerning their use? You may also wish to check a Greek dictionary such as Vine's or Thayer.