

God Does Not Dwell in Houses Made By Hands (Acts 6:1-7:60)

1. We see a seismic shift in Acts.

A. We see how a person finds acceptance before God and a home among God's people. This has created great animosity between the followers of Jesus and the temple authorities. The apostles were arrested and beaten and released. But, they were not intimidated into silence.

B. We see a shift away from the temple in Jerusalem and toward faith in Jesus Christ. (6-7) And it comes to a murderous climax. This shift means persecution and death to Christians.

2. We are introduced to a man named Stephen.

Acts 6:1 "Now at this time, as the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint developed on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food."

A. Who were the Hellenists?

The Hellenists were Jews who had lived outside of Palestine and therefore spoke Greek. At this point in Acts they were living in Jerusalem where the dominant languages are Hebrew and Aramaic. Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew-speaking believers have become brothers and sister in the church. This created a language and cultural barrier. It also caused a breakdown where Greek-speaking widows are not getting the daily distribution of food. The Greek-speakers picked seven men among them who would do right by these widows. One of those men was Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 6:2-6 "So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 "Instead, brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The announcement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And they brought these men before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

B. A snapshot of how things are going in the "you shall be my witnesses" department.

The Apostles are preaching the resurrection of Jesus. Their numbers are multiplying day by day. Even priests are turning to Jesus.

Acts 6:7 "The word of God kept spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

C. Something else is increasing their anger.

Acts. 6:8 "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people."

3. Stephen is Seized.

Acts 6:9 “But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.”

A. There was only one temple, which was in Jerusalem.

However, there were numerous synagogues in population centers. Synagogues were the center of Jewish life and gathering places.

B. What was the synagogue of the Freedmen?

Freedmen were former slaves who had been emancipated by their owners. It's possible Stephen attended this synagogue before he came to faith in Christ. He may still have attended to engage the Greek-speaking Jews about Jesus. Can you imagine what it would have been like for Stephen to speak at the synagogue and say things like:

“Now that the once-for-all perfect sacrifice has been offered, we don't need to be taking sacrifices to the temple anymore. In fact, we don't even need the temple building anymore. Jesus is the only temple we need.”

Acts 6:10-12 “But they were unable to cope with his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council.”

C. It appears that those gathered at the Freedman's synagogue became increasingly angry.

These people came to Jerusalem to be near the temple. And here is Stephen preaching the temple is no longer needed. It was difficult for them to argue with Stephen because he supported everything he said with their own Scriptures. So what did they do?

Acts 6:13-14 “They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man does not stop speaking against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

It was like an echo of the accusations that were made against Jesus before this same council, when he was accused of threatening to tear down the temple (John 2:19).

Notice the two accusations: 1) Stephen is threatening to destroy the temple; and 2) he's seeking to change the law of Moses. (13-14)

Acts 6:15 “And all who were sitting in the Council stared at him, and they saw his face, which was like the face of an angel.”

D. This must have been maddening for the Jewish leaders.

Just as they were accusing Stephen of showing disrespect for the law of Moses, his face began to glow in the same way Moses's face had glowed when he came down the mountain after receiving the law written on stone! Caiaphas asks:

Acts 7:1 “Now the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

Stephen launches into a Bible overview, knowing that they're not going to like the ending. His central message is that they shouldn't be surprised that the temple in Jerusalem is no longer the place where God meets with his people since God has never been confined to the temple in Jerusalem.