

# **The Acts Of The Apostles**

*Daily Bible Reading Notes*

*Week 6 (Chapter 7:29-8:25)*

**Grace Church Belper**

**<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>**

# Day 1 : Acts 7:29-36 – Stephen's Defence (4)

Prayerfully read (above and): Exodus 3

## Understanding

The land of “Midian” is in and by the Sinai peninsula (Exodus 3:12). It is named after the Midianites' ancestor, a son of Abraham through Keturah (Gen. 25:2). Whilst there, Moses married Zipporah, daughter of Midianite leader Jethro, and he had two sons by her (Exodus 2:15-25, 18:3-4).

In verse 30 the one who appeared to Moses is called “an angel of the Lord”; in verse 32, he is described as being God himself. This makes it clear that Moses saw an appearance of the Son of God – the second person of the Godhead. He is both God, but also not the Father. The Old Testament does not reveal the truths about the Trinity in so many words, but it does contain many things which clearly point to it.

God's reason for deciding to save the Israelites was because of his covenant – the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. See, for example, Genesis 17. It was not because the Israelites were good, or deserving – but because God had promised. When he heard their cries, he remembered his own covenant (verse 34).

Stephen's point is, again, that Israel had a consistent track record of rejecting the leaders whom God had chosen – as it was now doing again with Christ.

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is a God who works in history through *covenants*. God's covenants describe how he will relate to certain people, and can contain free and gracious promises, or promises of rewards for obedience, or threats of punishments for disobedience. God is always completely faithful to his covenants, and intervenes in history to make sure that they are fulfilled. It is crucial to understand covenants to understand the Bible. Our salvation is a covenant salvation (Hebrews 8:6, 13:20) – understanding this will very much enlarge our appreciation of the Bible and ability to benefit from it.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do you understand covenants? What are they? What are the most important covenants in the Bible? If you don't, then resolve that you will. Ask for a recorded sermon.
- Moses was in the wilderness for a long time – but God was faithful. Where are there things where you need to be more patient and trusting?

# Day 2 : Acts 7:37-43 – Stephen's Defence (5)

Prayerfully read: Exodus 20 & 32

## Understanding

Remember the overall point of Stephen's speech. He is showing the Jews that Christianity is not a new religion – he was completely sound in his belief concerning what God had done before. Jesus completed and fulfilled (not replaced) God's promises. Secondly, he is showing them that in rejecting Jesus, they are doing exactly what their predecessors had done. Thirdly, he is showing them that God was in no way tied to the temple – it was just temporary.

Moses had told the people of another coming prophet – like himself. Moses was a long time away from the people when he received God's laws (Exodus 24:18). In that time, they lost patience and turned to worshipping idols. The people broke God's covenant, and rejected Moses' words – in their hearts, they were unchanged (verse 39). This was exactly the mistake that Jewish leadership were now doing again in rejecting Jesus. Israel had been perverse from that day until now – they were not a faithful people. God had judged them many times for it – especially when they were attacked by the Babylonians, and many of them taken away (verse 43).

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- Even the greatest miracles and blessings of God will not ensure that a person loves or obeys God. Only being born again can do this. What we need is not great miracles outside of us – but the great miracle inside of us of the Holy Spirit giving us a new heart and drawing us to Jesus Christ.
- God's patience is not infinite. Many of God's attributes are infinite – his knowledge, his power, his love to his people, his justice and holiness. His patience is extremely great – but not unlimited. There is for everybody an appointed time after which God will not offer mercy or forgiveness any more – he will only give them up to their own foolishness, in preparation for their judgment.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Are you born again? Do you love the Lord Jesus? Have you ceased to resist the gospel, and given myself over to it that I might be saved?
- Are there areas of life where you are resisting God's will? Remember that God's will is all-wise and all-loving – as a perfect Father to a child.

# Day 3 : Acts 7:44-50 – Stephen's Defence (6)

Prayerfully read: 2 Samuel 7

## Understanding

Here, the theme of God's "house" becomes central in Stephen's speech. Remember that he is defending himself from the accusation that he had blasphemed against the temple. Here, Stephen is showing that the temple was not a necessary or permanent feature – God had in the past dwelt amongst his people in many other ways.

When wandering in the wilderness, they had had a tabernacle – which God had commanded. Solomon had built the first temple (which had since been destroyed); but God had made it quite clear through the prophet Isaiah (66:1-2) that God could not just dwell in a confined place: he is too great!

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- Under the Old Covenant, God lived in a special way amongst the people of Israel. They were his people – a single nation, in a single place at any one time. His presence was represented especially through the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, and later on in the temples (the first built by Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians; the second in the days Haggai which was then rebuilt by Herod). But this presence was always symbolic. God is not a being who dwells only in one place at a time – he is everywhere at all times! The buildings of the Old Covenant were pictures and promises. They pointed forward to the time when God would dwell in the hearts of all his people by the Holy Spirit in the church – in reality. There are many things in the Old Testament which must not be understood to be merely literal – there are many symbols and promises which we need the New Testament to properly understand.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How often do you think about the fact of being in God's presence? We are in his presence when waking, when sleeping, when getting up, when sitting down – at all times. This should comfort us (if we are saved); it should also teach us to live carefully. Resolve that when you have "spare" moments when your mind is wandering, you will meditate about this.
- Whatever things we have done for God, we must be humble about them. Even if we build him a temple – yet it is nowhere near enough! The right attitude is to be grateful that he allows us to serve him – whilst admitting that our service has many faults. Is this your attitude?

## Day 4 : Acts 7:51-53 – Stephen Concludes

Prayerfully read: Ezekiel 36 (note particularly the promises about conversion - “a heart of flesh”, a “new spirit”, etc.).

### Understanding

Stephen has now covered all the major events in Israel's history – the patriarchs, the Exodus, the giving of the law, the times of the kings, the prophets, the exile. He has shown that his faith is the historic faith of God's people. But Israel's leaders were following in the same God-dishonouring way as those before them, and he now moves to apply his testimony to them.

He accuses them of “resisting the Holy Spirit”. God had been amongst them – but they had not been willing to yield to his ways. God's chosen leaders and prophets in previous days had regularly, routinely been hated – and murdered. Now Stephen boldly proclaims that Jesus is the Christ (the “Just One”); and that they had murdered him. They pretended to be defenders of the law – but they had not kept it. They were guilty and exposed to God's fierce judgment. Thus we see Stephen preaching just like Peter before him.

### Doctrines (Teachings)

- Preachers of God's word must be bold. They have no business in thinking about whether their hearers will like what they say. Their role is to be willing to say whatever the word of God says – whether welcome or unwelcome. A cowardly preacher is not fit to be a preacher. This also places a duty upon hearers. Those who hear preaching must be willing to be rebuked by it. We must not be ready only to hear pleasant things, but also to hear unpleasant things. We must not despise the preacher or pastor who says unwelcome things to us – rather we must humble ourselves to consider if what is said is true, and be grateful to God that he made someone bold enough to say it!
- All Christians must be bold in opposing wickedness, in speaking what is right in love, and in witnessing. As we begin doing this, God will give us help by his Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 1:7).

### Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- What was your reaction last time you heard a preacher say something that came close to you? Was it a godly reaction, or an ungodly one? How willing are you to let God's word challenge you?
- Are you bold in witness? In reality, we all find this difficult. We need to ask God for more of his Spirit, more faith, love for the truth and the lost.

# Day 5 : Acts 7:54-60 – Stephen is Martyred

Prayerfully read: Matthew 26:36-75

## Understanding

Again the hearers were “cut to the heart” - but not with repentance, but with anger. Stephen, though, at this moment, having spoken faithfully, is given a wonderful revelation by God. He sees into the throne-room of heaven, and sees Jesus reigning at God's right hand. This is too much for court. They are so infuriated by hearing this, that they cannot stand that Stephen should live for a moment longer.

Notice the similarities between Jesus' death and Stephen's. They were both falsely accused (of blasphemy, particularly about the temple). They both boldly witnessed to the truth in front of their accusers. They both spoke of the Son of Man being at the right hand of God. They both called on God to forgive their murderers. They both prayed that God would receive their spirits. Luke's point is that Stephen was a faithful servant of his master. His master had died for Stephen's sins; Stephen was now dying for a testimony to his Lord.

Here in Acts, Luke introduces us to somebody who will become very important – Saul, later to be re-named Paul. He is a “young man” (v58), a Pharisee; and he gathered the clothes. He was complicit in Stephen's death (see also 26:10).

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- Death will come to everybody. All the children of Adam die, because Adam sinned and brought death upon the whole race. We must live like those who expect to die. This does not mean being morbid; rather it means that we must live as those who realise that life will end and we will be summoned into presence of God to face the eternal consequences of the choices we made. If we wish to be near to the Lord Jesus in the hour of death, the only way is to be near to him throughout our lives.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- Do you think about your death? When did you last time? Are you ready to die? How can you be ready? What if the Lord came for you today? Resolve to live each day and moment in a godly way, knowing that God might choose call you to himself at the end of it.
- Is there anybody that you are not ready to forgive? Remember that Jesus prayed even for his own murderers – and even forgave you.

# Day 6 : Acts 8:1-8 – Persecution!

Prayerfully read: 1 Timothy 1, Acts 22

## Understanding

Before, the church had enjoyed the favour of the people, but its leaders had been persecuted by the leaders of the Jews. Now, a new situation arises. The church in general is persecuted (though the apostles this time were safe). This was a “great” persecution (v1) – in which Saul was fully involved (v3).

This persecution forced the church to scatter from Jerusalem. Until now, it had not progressed out of the capital, although there was a very great number of believers in Jerusalem. We are not told what the apostles' thoughts or understanding was about how they were going to be witnesses beyond Judea and amongst the Gentiles (1:8).

This persecution might have seemed like a great setback – the ordinary believers were now cut off from the apostles. But in fact, it led to a great advance. Those who were scattered preached the gospel wherever they went (v4). The word went out throughout the land of Israel! Instead of one church – many! And Philip (the deacon, 6:5) went to Samaria. We do not know just why he did so precisely then – to what extent he knew that it was the Lord's will. The Samaritans were half-Jews, considered by Jews as unclean and compromised. Philip preached the gospel to them, and a great number believed, and mighty miracles were performed.

This passage then, begins to explain how the gospel advanced from Jerusalem to Judea – part of what Christ declared before ascending (1:8).

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- God is sovereign in everything – even in very unwelcome things. The church now experienced a widespread, vicious persecution; but it led to a great advance for the gospel. This is the Lord's way – the way to blessing is through suffering. Apparently unwelcome events are by no means necessarily bad; the Lord is able to show his great power in them to get all the glory to himself.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- How do you see hardships? Do they lead you to complain, or are you able to quietly accept them, trusting that the Lord has a good purpose?
- Does the gospel bring you “great joy” (v8). Should it? Why? Meditate on some reasons. The world needs men like Philip who boldly go to preach the gospel where it's never been preached before – is that you?

# Day 7 : Acts 8:9-25 – A False Convert

Prayerfully read: John 4:1-42 (Jesus' journey through Samaria)

## Understanding

In Samaria we meet a new phenomena – a false profession of faith. There was a man called Simon who used to practice sorcery, and through it deceived people into believing that he was a very important person. But when he heard Philip preaching, he believed, and was not baptised.

This advance for the gospel was a unique event. At Pentecost, a new church of Jews had been formed in Jerusalem. Now, as Christ had promised the gospel advanced out into Judea and Samaria. But Christ had promised that the apostles would be involved in this advance – and so it was necessary for them to come down so that the Holy Spirit might be given to the Samaritan church too. This was something that could be seen (v18), so presumably involved tongues and other miracles as on the day of Pentecost.

When Simon saw what was done, he revealed his heart. He offered the apostles money, so that he might be able to do the same thing. His heart was still in slavery to desire for power and prestige – to be thought of as a great man. When Peter exposes his sin to him, he is troubled, but instead of repenting, merely asks Peter to pray for him. That is the language of an unconverted person – a converted person knows they can pray to God directly themselves. Simon didn't express sorrow for his sin, but merely asks for prayer that the consequences of it will be avoided.

## Doctrines (Teachings)

- It is possible to make a false profession of faith, and to deceive oneself and others about its reality. A person can have a head-belief, but their heart can be unchanged. But what we really are, will show itself – the tree is known by its fruit. Those who are truly inwardly changed by the Spirit of God, will over time show the fruits of the Spirit; those who are still in slavery to sin will show the fruits of that slavery.

## Applying (Make sure that you are detailed and specific!)

- What effect has there been on your life since you believed? Changing does not *make* you a Christian, but it will inevitably happen if you *are* a Christian. Where does the evidence point in your life?
- What is your heart's desire? Do you react badly unless you are the centre of attention, or acknowledged? Do you have a contentment in God, or are you wanting something else? What areas of your life are affected?