

ACTS 6-9

1) The apostles choose an additional 7 leaders to be responsible for the practical and spiritual needs of the 'Hellenists' (Greek-speaking Jews) living in Jerusalem.

- Even though these 7 are supposed to be responsible for the practical needs of a growing body of believers, at least 2 among them (Stephen and Philip) also become compelling evangelists in their own right, bridging the communication gap between the local Aramaic language (among Hebrews) and the Greek language (universal language of the time).

2) Stephen (one of the 7) proclaims the gospel (good news) about Jesus very persuasively in one of the Greek-speaking synagogues in Jerusalem, so much so, that he is seen both as a threat and a blasphemer. He is taken outside and stoned to death. The leader of that synagogue and the one who gives official permission for the stoning, is Saul (or Paul in Greek).

- The accusations against Stephen and the contents of his sermon, reveal: 1) a questioning of the necessity of the temple and a prediction of its destruction. God is not bound by location or laws (7:48ff). He also traces scriptural prophecies pointing to the messiah (being 'raised') all the way back to Moses' teaching (7:37ff), and he accuses the leaders and the Jewish people as a whole of having been resistant to God's prophets and leaders all the way back to the patriarchs. He is undermining the foundations of the traditional Jewish faith and questioning the faithfulness of the people. No wonder he is a threat.

- As he is being stoned to death, he follows Jesus' dying witness according to Luke's crucifixion account by doing 2 things: 1) praying for the forgiveness of his killers, and 2) committing his spirit into God's eternal care (see Luke 23: 34,46).

3) That day a persecution begins against all Christians, and especially against non-citizens of Jerusalem (Greek-speaking Jews who were not necessarily permanent residents). Among them is another one of the 7 new appointees - Philip. He goes to Samaria and proclaims the gospel there. Having such a great response, Peter and John also go down to check out for themselves what is going on. They finish what has begun by Philip by laying hands on the new believers so that the Holy Spirit also comes upon them (the same Spirit that has been moving among believers in Jerusalem). Philip then comes face to face with a Gentile proselyte (a non-Jew who has adopted the Jewish faith), and guides him into the fold. He also baptizes him. This previews what will become manifest among the gentiles later on - namely, a receptive faith in the gospel of Jesus as the Christ (messiah).

- Unlike Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, Simon the magician is given the chance to repent of his dishonest ways in being part of the believers' fellowship.

- Even though there is a lag of time between the Samaritans believing the gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit, (and this, because the apostles seem to have the authority to pass on the 'full' gospel), this does not continue to be the case as things progress in the church.

- The Ethiopian Eunuch is reading a passage from Isaiah very central to the early church's understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus' way as a 'suffering' messiah. It was the perfect springboard for Philip to teach him about Jesus as the one.

- Philip disappears from him the same way as Jesus disappeared from the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (in Luke's account of the resurrection appearances of Jesus (Luke 24)).

4) Saul realizes that the disease of false religion has not been curbed with the stoning of Stephen, and so takes it upon himself to follow its trail beginning with rooting them out in Damascus (present day Syria just north of Israel). On the way, however, he has some kind of breakdown and some kind of encounter with the risen Christ. He is converted to 'the way' he has been trying to stamp out, and it takes time for believers to trust that he is not a spy among them. Paul will understand his vision of Christ as equally legitimate as any physical encounter with the risen Christ.

5) As Paul's ministry is beginning, Peter's reaches new heights, especially in the kinds of healing he performs. He heals a paralytic and resuscitates a dead woman, emulating Jesus' ministry and representing his authority. Jesus is alive and active through the hands and feet of the apostles and the church in the power of the Holy Spirit.