

**STUDY NOTES****Lesson 3: Acts 6, 7, 8, 9**

*Therefore they that were scattered abroad  
went everywhere preaching the word.*

*Acts 8: 4*

"The Greek word "**Diaspora**" means "scattering." And indeed there was a scattering of Jews throughout the known Greek and Roman world from the third century B.C. There's a famous utterance by Strabo, a Greek geographer of the late first century, B.C., who said, you can't go "anywhere in the civilized world without encountering a Jew." There were large Middle Eastern Jewish communities—in Egypt, in Syria (the city of Antioch) and throughout Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)—just as there were Jewish communities throughout Greece and the Italian peninsula (Rome). Early Christianity first spread in those areas where there was a Jewish presence. That is, it spread in Egypt, it spread in Syria, it spread in Asia Minor, and it spread in Greece and Italy. These are the areas where we know there were Jewish communities and Jewish synagogues. The earliest Christian missionaries, like Paul, would begin by approaching their fellow Jews, and converting some of them to the new religion.

see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/diaspora.html>

**CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH—ACTS 6**

In every age in which God is working with men on the earth through the authorized channel of prophets, priesthood, and the people organized under them, problems arise. What does it say in the book of Job? "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." Anyone who imagines otherwise does not yet understand the refining purposes of earth life. The church does not sail forward with nothing but good winds and calm seas. But we will see how God uses the opposition that always arises for his good purposes in the lives of those who keep their faith.

We should not be surprised that the early Christian Jewish converts ran into trouble of a kind common in all ages—cultural misunderstandings and prejudices. The "Grecians"—converts from Judaism whose language and culture were Greek—worshipped in different congregations from their Hebrew counterparts—those native to the area who spoke the Aramaic of Palestine. The prejudices between Grecian and Hebrew Jews unfortunately carried over to the congregations of converted Christians from these groups. The language barrier was formidable. The foreigners were often considered second class Jews, under unfair suspicion for bringing in supposedly "worldly" ideas from Greek culture. When the Grecian widows complained that they were being slighted in the daily issue of charitable provisions, hard feelings arose.

If you read Acts 6:5 you see the names of seven men the apostles chose to work out these issues so that they could concentrate on "the ministry of the word." All the names are Greek. While that does not make it certain that all seven were indeed Grecians, because at this time in history Hebrew Jews sometimes took Greek names, it is likely that the calling of the seven provided leaders who could minister sympathetically to the Greek community of Jews. But more trouble is right around the corner, arising from the larger community of unconverted Greek Jews.

Stephen, "full of faith and power", was vigorously preaching the message of the gospel in Greek. And he was preaching it effectively and energetically, so that his hearers "could not resist" his message. Those who opposed him most were leaders from the Grecian synagogues who did not want him stirring up trouble and opposition to their community, as it tended to be suspect already in the eyes of the Jewish elite. So on the basis of false witnesses, Stephen finds himself hauled before the same council of the Sanhedrin that had interrogated Peter and John. The Greeks want the Sanhedrin to put a stop to Stephen's preaching. And the Sanhedrin wanted to hear for themselves just what Stephen is preaching about that is causing such opposition.

**STEPHEN'S DEFENSE—ACTS 7**

Acts 7 is the longest chapter in the book—60 verses. Stephen's defense is a long recitation of the history of the Jewish people. At first glance there is nothing here that was not well known to the leaders who knew the scriptures well. But look closer and you see that Stephen has chosen his details carefully to build a case for a radical recasting of the Jewish faith. This proves to be his doom in the end, for the over-arching purpose of the Sanhedrin is to hold onto power and keep the status quo.

It is easy to fault the Sanhedrin, and they are to be blamed, there is no question. But perhaps we should all ask ourselves how open we are to new ideas or that come from a direction unlooked for. Nothing is more surrounded with and bound by tradition than religion. But we must not let our own traditions become blinders that keep us from accepting unexpected truth. Jesus said, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the spirit (John 3:8). The most reliable way to stay on the right path is to be prayerful and faithful so that we stay close to the spirit of God and can follow His anointed prophet willingly.

Which brings us back to Stephen's speech. For the examples he chose illustrated this very theme. The heroes of the faith he mentions —Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses — are all in right standing with God because they had a living relationship with God, allowing Him to lead them into new territory and surprising paths. Jewish worship had calcified into fixation with the Temple, the Torah (the five books of the law written by Moses) and the destiny of the nation of Israel. To the Jews, having the Temple and the Torah clearly made them a people superior to any on earth. The only missing piece was Messiah, who would complete the picture by restoring the nation to its rightful place of glory. They had no inkling of their own spiritual deadness.

From our modern perspective they missed the mark by focusing on a vision of national rather than individual salvation. Moses had preached that someday another prophet would arise "like [him]", and to that prophet the people must listen. (Deut. 18:15) We ask then, what would a prophet be like who was "like" Moses? Moses had led them out of bondage to Pharaoh. This prophet would lead them out of bondage to Satan (or sin and death). Moses had brought them the law of God. This prophet would bring more law from God.<sup>1</sup> Moses was their intermediary with God. This prophet would be their intermediary, or advocate with the Father. Moses performed mighty signs and miracles. This prophet would also perform mighty signs and miracles. Moses had offered to die for them when God was angered by their sins. This prophet did die for his people's sins. Moses was a picture or shadow of the real thing, a type of the Redeemer.

After his long, somewhat dull recitation of the history of the Patriarchs, Stephen abruptly switches gears and reminds the Sanhedrin of Israel's shameful record of unfaithfulness. As they had once turned from God to worship idols, and as they had once persecuted the prophets, so now they had betrayed and murdered the very Messiah whose coming Moses had foretold! Shocked by this bold condemnation, they "lose it," or as the Bible says, they "gnashed on him with their teeth." But calm as a lamb Stephen looks up into the heavens and announces that he can see "the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." His audience had not forgotten the declaration that Jesus himself made when He stood there. When they asked Him if He was the son of God: "Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:62) For this he was crucified.

Now Stephen had reached a similar point of no return. He was not just preaching an apostate form of Judaism and trying to garner support for one more Messianic claim. No, this was blasphemy of the worst sort! To say that Jesus was sitting with God on His throne was to equate him with God. This declaration sealed his fate. They could send Peter away with a beating for preaching that Jesus was the Messiah, but they would stone Stephen for claiming that Jesus was divine. John 5:18 says of Jesus, "Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he ... said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God."

(Note: Twice before, in Acts 3:13 and 3:26, Peter seems to testify that Jesus is the son of God and no one objects. However the word here translated *son* is the Greek word "paheece," usually translated *servant*. All other uses of this word in the New Testament are translated *servant*. The Greek word "hweeos," which always means son or child, is the Greek word used in every other instance of the word 'son' in Acts. All newer translations read "servant of God" rather than "son of God" in the two passages mentioned. The apostles had not yet gone public with their tradition shattering doctrine that Jesus was literally the Son of God. Think of the Shema, the most common prayer in Judaism: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." (Deut. 6:4) The idea that Jesus was one of three members of the Godhead, was as yet unthinkable.)

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<sup>1</sup> See endnote on The Higher Law.

### **PERSECUTION SPREADS THE WORD—ACTS 8**

Saul, who stood by, was “consenting” to Stephen’s death. We are told that he is a “young” man, but as we read in the footnote, this word in Greek referred to anyone under 40. He was old enough to have some sort of authority with the high priests.

The city of Jerusalem would have buzzed with talk of Stephen’s death and burial, which was accompanied by “a great lamentation over him.” This mourning was specifically forbidden by Jewish tradition for anyone executed for blasphemy. Things were at a boiling point and emotions were running high. Saul, a pupil of the revered Pharisee, Gamaliel, and a man who was on his way up in leading circles of the Pharisees, was motivated by his zealous fury to wipe out the nest of foul apostates. This was how he saw the believers in Jesus, particularly the Grecian Jews who taught that Jesus was the Son of God. This group suffered the most for their association with Stephen, a Greek, and the “blasphemous” doctrine he preached of Christ’s divinity.

And so they fled. They left the hot spot of Jerusalem for outlying cities where they could lay low. Baptized followers of Jesus now would have numbered in the thousands, probably well over 10,000. Suddenly that number dropped as people fled for their lives. A victory for the enemy? Not at all. It turned out to be the fastest, most efficient way possible to spread the message of Christ throughout all Judea. As Paul was later to write in his letter to the Romans, “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Luke’s account follows the preaching of Phillip, one of the seven leaders of the Greek Jewish Christians (Acts 6:5), as he preached the gospel to a city in Samaria. These people, so long despised by the Jews as “half-breeds”, received the word with “great joy.” The pattern repeats itself of signs and wonders being done in the name of Jesus, leading many to repentance and baptism. An interesting side story is told of Simon, known traditionally as Simon Magus (i.e. Simon the Magician). Peter rebukes Simon when he asks if he can buy the power to lay hands on people and give them the gift of the Holy Ghost. We get the word “simony” from this incident, meaning to make a profit from sacred things.

Chapter eight ends with Philip being sent by an angel to the highway south of Gaza. Phillip was a man who was used to obeying the promptings of the spirit. He didn’t ask what his assignment there was. He just went. As he was traveling he saw an Ethiopian man in his chariot by the side of the road. Not until that moment does the spirit say, in effect, “See that man. He’s the reason you came. Go talk to him.” Between Phillip’s preaching and the spirit’s witness, the Ethiopian is converted and baptized then and there in a roadside body of water. The wording here, “down into the water”, is clearly supportive of baptism by immersion.

### **THE CONVERSION OF SAUL—ACTS 9**

Luke has planted a mention of Saul in previous chapters. Now Saul moves to the forefront of the action as he becomes a persecutor of the early saints—“breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.” (Acts 9:1) The fact that he asked for and received letters of authority from the chief priests in Jerusalem to round up disciples in the city of Damascus shows both how successful the spread of the new beliefs had been and how determined Saul was to stamp them out, for it took 7 days of rigorous travel to make the journey of 140 miles.

When they are almost there Saul has the remarkable experience that will revolutionize his life. It is also one of the most important, far reaching events in the history of the Christian church. God knew his man. Saul had put tremendous energy into defending the truth as he understood it, raging against the Christians. From the point of his conversion to Christ he would put that same dogged determination into spreading the new faith.

But first God needed to humble him. God can’t use proud, hard-hearted men and women in his cause. He needs pliable ones that He can form into “chosen vessels.” Hearing the question of the Lord, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?” and being struck blind by the bright light from heaven was a good beginning. Saul’s response is “Who art thou, Lord?” He recognized the divinity of the voice, but can hardly fathom the implications.

“I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest.” This answer echoes Jesus’ saying made to his disciples on the Mount of Olives, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matt 25:40) Saul’s response is possibly the only one we dare make when we are in serious trouble with our God. He asks, “Lord,

what would you have me do?" We might want to remember this response when we find ourselves in a fix that only God can get us out of.

Paul is led into the city of Damascus where he is told to await further instructions. The Lord calls Ananias to go to Paul and heal him. When Ananias hesitates because of Paul's reputation, the Lord tells him about the mission he has in store for Paul. Under the hands of Ananias he receives his sight. Luke uses the interesting phrasing that "scales" fell from his eyes. The spiritual blindness that afflicted him for many years is now healed as well, for immediately Paul "arose, and was baptized." He stays for a time in Damascus, strengthening the local saints rather than persecuting them. For his actions he acquires new enemies intent on destroying his powerful witness.

The Luke account given here in Acts is a shorthand version of the actual history. We learn from Paul's account in Galatians (1:17-18) that he spent the first three years after his conversion between Arabia and the city of Damascus. Little is known of the three years before he starts his mission, although surely his prayers and study during this time provided a crucible of intense growth. After this he makes his first trip of 15 days to Jerusalem. Once in Jerusalem he finds the church understandably reluctant to accept him into their midst. It is Barnabas, the generous disciple of Acts 4:36, who speaks for Saul and convinces the saints that he can now be trusted.

Chapter 9 ends with Peter again, telling of two miracles done by him that bear striking similarity to the Savior's own works. These are performed in Lydda and Joppa respectively, showing the movement of the work outward from Jerusalem into the coastal plains. First, a paralytic is healed and commanded to arise and take up his bed. Then in Joppa Peter raises the widow Dorcas from the dead with the words, in Aramaic, "Tabitha, kumi," It was Jesus who raised Jarius' daughter from the dead with the words, "Talitha, kumi." Luke was surely aware of the parallels he was drawing. Whenever and wherever Christ's servants work in His name, He is still there, healing and raising men and women from death and despair into new life.

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**Endnote: *The New Law of Jesus Christ*** To fulfill the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15 that a new prophet would come who would be "like Moses," that prophet must bring new law since Moses was universally recognized among the prophets as the great lawgiver. All the prophets after Moses reinforced the Mosaic law, calling for repentance, and prophesying about what would happen if the people broke God's law, but none of them changed or added to the Mosaic code.

*The idea of new law bears examination. In what way did Jesus bring new law or change the Mosaic Law that was so revered by the people? Simply put, Jesus upped the ante. Mosaic law was concerned with outward actions—concrete dos and don'ts. In His lifetime the Lord brought a higher law. It got its height by resting on the solid base of the old law. The Ten Commandments were not destroyed but were firmly in place as a foundation for the new, higher way. It was definitely a harder law, because it demanded not only outward acts, but also inward motivations. A man was no longer righteous by not murdering or not committing adultery. Now righteousness meant a pure and a forgiving heart. A woman who was outwardly pious but inwardly bitter and covetous was no longer reconciled with God.*

*The two sermons known as the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple (the Book of Mormon version) are the concentrated synopses of the new demands on God's covenant children. Other terms used to contrast the two systems are the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, from which we get our titles for the two halves of the Bible: Old Testament and New Testament. An interesting verse in the Book of Mormon refers to "the temporal law" and "the spiritual law (2Nephi 2:5)." The old covenant required obedience and sacrifice; the new covenant, or Law of the Gospel (D&C 88:78; 104:18) required charity, the pure love of Christ, and thus made beggars of us all, for none of us has naturally the inner goodness and grace needed to live this way.*