

# Lesson 5 | July 3, 2022

## Increasing Ministry and Stephen's Martyrdom

**Study Text:** Acts 6:1 through 7:60

**Central Truth:** The gospel is the power of God for salvation.

**Key Verse: Acts 6:7**

The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly (KJV).

God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem (NLT).

### Learning Objectives

- Students will observe how God uses problems to help churches expand their ministries.
- Students will embrace a willingness to serve as the Spirit enables.
- Students will proclaim and teach the gospel so people can be saved and grow in their faith.

## Introducing the Lesson

**Say:** The Early Church was continuing to grow. As it did, it attracted more and more attention from the Jewish leaders, many of whom had been instrumental in the crucifixion of Jesus. These people, who thought they were ridding themselves of a problem by crucifying Jesus now found that, instead of a scattering of followers, this group had grown to thousands and was continuing to grow. Their efforts to stop the Church were only increasing its success.

### Opening Activity—Learning by Doing

*Ask: What things have you had to learn how to do just by doing them? Is learning by doing an inferior or superior way to learn? Explain your answer. **Learning to read and do math.***

**Say:** Often growing in ability and knowledge comes as we tackle problems. Think of how you learned to change a tire—or why you have never learned to change a tire. Learning such a skill usually happens by doing it, often out of necessity. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The Early Church learned to be more effective in ministry as believers tackled problems that arose. They learned to involve more people in various areas of ministry. They learned that people other than the apostles could perform miracles and proclaim the gospel. They also learned that proclaiming the gospel comes with a cost, but is well

worth the cost. May we learn from their example so we may be more effective in proclaiming the gospel.

## **Part 1—Serving a Multiplying Church**

### **Growing Pains**

Acts 6:1–6

**[Act 6:1-6 KJV] 1 And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. 2 Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples [unto them], and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. 3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. 4 But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. 5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: 6 Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid [their] hands on them.**

**Say:** Growth creates its own set of problems. Ask any parents who feel like they cannot keep their kids in the proper size clothing. The Early Church faced problems because of the growth it experienced. The infrastructure was not there to handle the increased needs of the Church. Similar challenges face churches today when they experience rapid growth. But, as with the Early Church, the Holy Spirit can provide direction and wisdom in facing the challenges. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

**Because of the rapid growth of the Early Church, some of the widows were being overlooked when help was distributed (Acts 6:1). They were Greek-speaking Jews who had come from other countries and likely did not speak Aramaic. The language barrier could have made them uncomfortable with or uncertain about seeking help.**

**When the apostles became aware of the issue, they called the believers together. They concluded that helpers were needed to address the problem, so the apostles could focus on their primary task of preaching the Word (verses 2–4). They proposed that seven Spirit-filled men be chosen to take on this responsibility. The apostles prayed for and laid hands on the men selected (verses 5–6). Many people consider this the first example of deacons in the Bible.**

As a church grows, important issues can get overlooked. This was the case in the Early Church. **The apostles addressed the situation by getting more people involved in ministering to the needs of the congregation. The selection of Greek-speaking men (inferred because all seven had Greek names) showed both wisdom and maturity on the part of these early believers. These seven likely had connections to those who were part of the neglected minority and so could more effectively minister to their needs.**

**The New Testament clearly teaches that each believer has a place of service within the body of Christ. Finding that place of service allows churches to minister effectively to believers and unbelievers alike.**

### **Resource Packet Item 1: A Place of Service**

Distribute the work sheet and divide your class into small groups. Give the groups a few minutes to read the passages and write down their answers. Then have the groups report and discuss the question at the bottom of the sheet. Consider speaking to your pastor about places of service in your church that could use volunteers and share those opportunities with students.

#### ***Discuss***

? Why is it important for pastors to spend time in prayer and the ministry of the Word?

? How have you grown in your faith through serving?

## **Sustained Growth**

Acts 6:7

**[Act 6:7 KJV] 7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.**

**Say:** When we face problems in the church or as individuals, we may be tempted to allow those difficulties to distract us and take us off course. Here the Early Church faced a situation that could have resulted in a distraction. Instead, they dealt with it and moved on to continue the work Jesus had called them to do. We must be cautious not to let challenges, even important ones, take us away from our main goal of reaching people for Jesus Christ.

(Share your highlights from the following text.)

Luke used several summary statements in Acts to highlight how the Lord sustained the growth of the Early Church (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14). **Acts 6:7 is one of those statements and serves as an important juncture in the story of these believers. The Spirit had guided the Church through pressures from without and problems from within. Proclaiming the message of Christ remained the believers' priority.**

The result of all this was that the number of people who came to faith in Jesus Christ multiplied. The reach of the gospel extended to every segment of society in Jerusalem. Even “a great company of the priests” (verse 7, KJV) became part of the Christian faith community.

Believers can find encouragement in this short statement. When they are faithful to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Spirit, people will come to faith in Jesus Christ. Persecution from outside of the church and problems within will not keep the Lord from building His Church.

In a sense, verse 7 describes the climax of the Church’s ministry in Jerusalem. **Chapter 6 continues with the ministry of Stephen, one of those chosen to serve by caring for widows. Chapter 7 concludes with his death, after which a rise in persecution caused many believers to leave the city. Yet, wherever they went, they stayed true to the faith and steadfast in proclaiming it.**

It would not be wrong to say the story of Acts continues today as the followers of Christ stay true to the faith and steadfast in proclaiming it. The Church of Jesus Christ continues to grow.

### ***Discuss***

? Why should believers continue to reach out to people they think might be open to the gospel (like the temple priests)?

? How can believers be more consistent in sharing the gospel with unbelievers around them?

## **Part 2—Powerful Ministry and Teaching Opposed Powerful in Deed and Word**

Acts 6:8–10

**[Act 6:8-10 KJV] 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. 9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called [the synagogue] of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.**

**Say:** The seven men who were chosen to manage the distribution of food were obviously involved in the practical, day-to-day ministry of the church. However, their ministry was not limited to this task. While it is easy to limit ourselves to one task in the church, often God wants to stretch us and use us in ways that are different from what

our initial inclination would be. All of these men were full of the Spirit and wisdom. We must never limit what God wants to do in our lives as we serve Him. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

**One of those chosen to serve the needy among the believers also was powerfully used by the Lord to proclaim the gospel. Stephen, though not one of the apostles, performed miracles and signs through the Spirit's power. These wonders opened opportunities for Stephen to tell others about Jesus (Acts 6:8).**

**Evidently, Stephen ministered among Jews who had come to Jerusalem from other parts of the world. Some men from the one of the synagogues that drew such Jews began to debate with Stephen. The scene started with open dialogue, perhaps a discussion of the Scriptures and how they related to Jesus being the Messiah. Stephen's arguments, fueled by the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, could not be refuted (verses 9–10). This account about Stephen is an encouragement to churches. Believers other than apostles (or pastors) can effectively minister in the power of the Spirit. All believers can, like Stephen, be full of faith, and of the Spirit and His power.**

When believers have a heart to serve and are yielded to the Lord, great things can happen. Those outside the church need to experience the power of God to meet their needs and to hear the good news about Jesus. **May God raise up a new generation of Stephens for such a time as this!**

### ***Discuss***

- ? Why do some believers think it is the job of pastors to evangelize the lost?
- ? How has the Spirit assisted you when talking to someone about the Lord?

## **Powerful in Adversity**

Acts 6:11–15

**[Act 6:11-15 KJV] 11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and [against] God. 12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon [him], and caught him, and brought [him] to the council, 13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: 14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. 15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.**

**Say:** Here we find another example of opposition and adversity following great work that God was doing among His people. **Stephen’s powerful ministry brought disdain from those who did not believe so they engaged him in a debate, but the Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to speak with wisdom.** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

**Sadly, as too often happens, when people cannot accept the message, they attack the messenger. When those who opposed Stephen could not win their debate, they did what so many others have done in similar circumstances—they twisted his words and used them against him. They persuaded men to claim what Stephen was saying was blasphemy against Moses and God (verse 11). They stirred up the people and their leaders with their false accusations (verses 13–14). Their claim was that Stephen was teaching that Jesus was going to change the way the Jews worshipped and their way of life (verse 12).**

**Stephen’s accusers took him by force to the “high council” (Sanhedrin). There they continued to accuse Stephen of “speaking against the holy temple and against the law of Moses” (verse 13, NLT). In contrast to the bluster of his accusers, Stephen remained calm. Furthermore, his face shone like an angel’s. Perhaps his appearance caused some in the council to recall how Moses’ face shone when he would come from being in the presence of God (Exodus 34:29–35). Was this a way the Lord showed His approval of Stephen and his message?**

Christians can be nervous about sharing their faith in Jesus. As in the case of Stephen, rejection of the message can result in opposition to the messenger. **Thankfully, Christians have the Holy Spirit working on their behalf, giving them boldness and the power to stay on mission. Christians proclaim the gospel, knowing that for some their witness is “a dreadful smell of death and doom,” while to others it is “a life-giving perfume” (2 Corinthians 2:16, NLT).**

#### **Resource Packet Item 2: Mary’s Dilemma**

Distribute the case study to students. Give them time to read the case study and respond to the questions, either individually or in small groups. Discuss their responses as a class.

#### ***Discuss***

? Why does rejection of the message of Christ at times turn into opposition to the messenger?

? How can fear of rejection hinder Christians from sharing their faith?

## **Part 3—The First Christian Martyr Stephen’s Defense**

Acts 7:1–2,51–53

**[Act 7:1-2, 51-53 KJV] 1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so? 2 And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, ... 51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers [did], so [do] ye. 52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept [it].**

**Say:** Stephen had a strong message for his listeners, and it was the message of Jesus Christ. He began with their own history as the chosen people of God and presented a clear message of the Messiah they had all anticipated, but yet had crucified. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

**After his accusers finished with their statements, Stephen had a chance to defend himself (Acts 7:1–2). He stood accused of blasphemy, speaking against the law of Moses and the temple. His defense was an account of God’s work on behalf of His people, beginning with the calling of Abraham. By doing so, Stephen addressed the charges of blasphemy by showing he had as firm a belief as his listeners in God’s establishment of their religion.**

**Stephen was not content simply to defend his teaching. He accused his listeners of rejecting God’s work on their behalf (verses 31–53). Did they not understand God is too great to be contained in a temple built by people, as the prophet Isaiah had stated? Did they love to hear Jewish history? Then they should not forget how their ancestors had repeatedly rejected what God wanted for them, even killing His messengers. His audience was just like their ancestors, for they had rejected and killed the Messiah. In so doing, they disobeyed the very Law they claimed to uphold.**

**One might read Stephen’s strong words and think they were spoken in anger. But it is more likely they were prompted by a heart that was breaking for his people.** How could they be so blind to the truth about Jesus? Why must they be like their ancestors who resisted the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts?

**Too often Christians are misrepresented in what they believe and teach. When we do need to defend what we believe, may we do so with respect and gentleness (1 Peter 3:15–16). May we not forget what we share is good news that brings life. Let how we live as followers of Jesus be the strongest point in our defense of the gospel. And may our words be “with grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6, KJV) that we may win hearts, not arguments.**

### ***Discuss***

? How would you answer someone who asked you why you believe the gospel?

? How can Christians keep their attitudes and motives right when defending the gospel?

## **Stephen's Death**

Acts 7:54–60

**[Act 7:54-60 KJV] 54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with [their] teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, 58 And cast [him] out of the city, and stoned [him]: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon [God], and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**

**Say:** We may wonder why God didn't spare Stephen's life rather than allowing him to be slaughtered by his accusers. But God had a far greater plan for Stephen. **His death made a lasting impression on a man named Saul, who later became Paul and wrote much of the New Testament.** God's plan is always for the greater good of the Kingdom, and we do well to trust Him in life and in death. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

**Stephen's impassioned plea for his listeners to quit resisting the work of the Holy Spirit and accept Jesus as the Messiah brought a strong response. They reacted with rage (Acts 7:54). In contrast, Stephen displayed a serenity fueled by a vision of the exalted Christ (verses 55–56). When Stephen reported what he was seeing, the Jewish leaders could stand no more. They dragged him outside the city and stoned him (verses 57–58).**

**When the Jewish leaders condemned Jesus, they were calculating and cunning. But their execution of Stephen was spontaneous, fueled by rage at him and, to a degree, their ongoing resentment and frustration with the followers of Jesus and their disregard for the Council's authority.**



**Even in his death, Stephen followed the example of his Lord Jesus. He committed his spirit to the Lord and asked for forgiveness for those who took his life.**

This man, who was full of the Holy Spirit, lived out his faith even as he took his last breath. Stephen's faithful witness would bear fruit for the sake of the kingdom of God, as foreshadowed by the inclusion of Saul's name in this account.

**While we do not like to think too much about it, we may be called on to lay down our lives for the sake of Christ and His gospel. In many places Spirit-filled Christians continue to tell others about Jesus, knowing it could result in persecution and possibly cost them their lives.**

**What gives Christians the courage to do this? The power of the Holy Spirit and the conviction that they will see Jesus at God's right hand welcoming them to their eternal home in His presence when they die. And there is the hope that the "Sauls" they witness to may one day become "Pauls" who declare, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21, KJV).**

### **Resource Packet Item 3: What Happens When a Christian Dies?**

Distribute the work sheet to students and ask for volunteers to read each of the Scripture passages aloud. After each passage is read, discuss the answers to the questions.

#### ***Discuss***

? In what ways have you faced opposition for your witness of Christ?

? How has the Holy Spirit given you courage and power to witness?

## **What Is God Saying to Us?**

**Say:** The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). As believers, we must proclaim the gospel so people will accept Christ as Savior. When issues rise within a church that threaten to hinder the proclamation of the gospel, we need to address them with godly compassion and wisdom from the Spirit. This may involve more people getting involved, using the gifts the Spirit has given them. This helps the church remain focused on its mission. Opposition from those outside of the faith should not move the church from its mission either. It should cause believers to seek to stay full of the Spirit, knowing He is the source of their courage and power.

## **Living It Out**

### **Ministry in Action**

- Consider how you could use your spiritual gifts to minister to needs inside and outside your church.
- Evaluate the people you interact with regularly to determine who might be open to hearing the gospel. Pray for opportunities to witness to them.
- Pray for the "Saul" in your life, the person who most strongly opposes your witness for Christ.

## Daily Bible Readings

### Monday:

Blessed Though Mistreated.  
Genesis 31:1–9

**[Gen 31:1-9 KJV] 1** And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, Jacob hath taken away all that [was] our father's; and of [that] which [was] our father's hath he gotten all this glory. **2** And Jacob beheld the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it [was] not toward him as before. **3** And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee. **4** And Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field unto his flock, **5** And said unto them, I see your father's countenance, that it [is] not toward me as before; but the God of my father hath been with me. **6** And ye know that with all my power I have served your father. **7** And your father hath deceived me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me. **8** If he said thus, The speckled shall be thy wages; then all the cattle bare speckled: and if he said thus, The ringstraked shall be thy hire; then bare all the cattle ringstraked. **9** Thus God hath taken away the cattle of your father, and given [them] to me.

### Tuesday:

Blessed in Adversity.  
Genesis 39:20–23

**[Gen 39:20-23 KJV] 20** And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners [were] bound: and he was there in the prison. **21** But the LORD was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. **22** And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that [were] in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer [of it]. **23** The keeper of the prison looked not to any thing [that was] under his hand; because the LORD was with him, and [that] which he did, the LORD made [it] to prosper.

### Wednesday:

Delivered From Death.  
Jeremiah 38:6–13

**[Jer 38:6-13 KJV] 6** Then took they Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that [was] in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon [there was] no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire. **7** Now when Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs which was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon; the king then sitting in the gate of Benjamin; **8** Ebedmelech went forth out of the king's house, and spake to the king, saying, **9** My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for [there is] no more bread in the city. **10** Then

the king commanded Ebedmelech the Ethiopian, saying, Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. 11 So Ebedmelech took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took thence old cast clouts and old rotten rags, and let them down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah. 12 And Ebedmelech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah, Put now [these] old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords. And Jeremiah did so. 13 So they drew up Jeremiah with cords, and took him up out of the dungeon: and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison.

#### **Thursday:**

Delivered To Be Crucified.  
Mark 15:1–15

[Mar 15:1-15 KJV] 1 And straightway in the morning the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and bound Jesus, and carried [him] away, and delivered [him] to Pilate. 2 And Pilate asked him, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answering said unto him, Thou sayest [it]. 3 And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. 4 And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee. 5 But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled. 6 Now at [that] feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. 7 And there was [one] named Barabbas, [which lay] bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. 8 And the multitude crying aloud began to desire [him to do] as he had ever done unto them. 9 But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews? 10 For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. 11 But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. 12 And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do [unto him] whom ye call the King of the Jews? 13 And they cried out again, Crucify him. 14 Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him. 15 And [so] Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged [him], to be crucified.

#### **Friday:**

The Life of Jesus Manifested.  
2 Corinthians 4:7–14

[2Co 4:7-14 KJV] 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. 8 [We are] troubled on every side, yet not distressed; [we are] perplexed, but not in despair; 9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; 10 Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. 11 For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal

flesh. 12 So then death worketh in us, but life in you. 13 We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak; 14 Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present [us] with you.

**Saturday:**

About Suffering for Christ.

1 Peter 4:12–16

**[1Pe 4:12-16 KJV] 12 Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: 13 But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. 14 If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy [are ye]; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or [as] a thief, or [as] an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. 16 Yet if [any man suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.**