

Empowered

The Amazing Church of Jesus Christ

Week 3

The Early Church in
Judea and Samaria

Acts 6:1 – 8:3

Teacher Notes

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*Bible versions used throughout the Empowered teacher notes are
NASB, ESV, NLT, and CEB.*

✂ Introduction to Week Three

ILLUSTRATION: Have you ever considered how the smallest thing can become the biggest problem? There was a church that decided to split; each party filed a lawsuit over the property. A church court assembled to hear both sides of the issue. The cause of the split? During a church fellowship supper, a child received a larger slice of ham than the elder seated next to him. This is a true story!

Study One:

Acts 6:1-15 Stephen's Appointment and Arrest

- The church was growing—great news! But it faced a crisis (a danger and an opportunity rolled up together).
- The Hellenistic Jews found issue with the native Jews in the church. They complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.
(Acts 6:1)

TEACHING TIP: The Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek, had come from other nations, and did not speak Aramaic. The Hebrews (native Jews) spoke both Aramaic and Greek.

⇒ **The Hellenists may have felt they were being treated as 'outsiders' versus family.**

→ **NOTE:** Under the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 10:18, widows were under special protection.

APPLICATION: The Hellenistic Jews had a legitimate issue; but consider how they addressed it. The word 'complaint' translates to 'murmuring.' Murmuring has a negative connotation and usually produces a destructive outcome—dissension where there should be unity.

Let's be honest! We all murmur—often it involves our personal perspective or preferences, whether it be worship style or who is preaching on a particular Sunday. Every church must resolve issues wisely or risk damaging its witness, or much worse destroying it by splitting apart—like our earlier example. Let's learn to leave murmuring at the door!

Someone once said, *"Church problems give us an opportunity to exercise our faith. A church full of lovingkindness is a powerful witness to all unbelievers and a joy to believers."*

- The early church leaders (the twelve apostles) created a division of labor as a practical solution to serving everyone well within the church.
 - ~ Twelve Apostles: prayer and ministry of the Word, their highest priority. (Acts 6:2-4)

~ Seven Men: tasked with serving the whole congregation, such as making sure all the widows received food.

- The people were instructed to select seven qualified men from among them to serve in this capacity. These men were to have specific qualities/traits that were known by the people themselves: (Acts 6:3)

~ A good reputation—men who were well-respected for their faith, integrity, and honesty. Trustworthy men.

~ Full of the Spirit—men who were filled and relied upon the Holy Spirit in ministering to others. Good men whose confidence was in God, thus walked in His truth.

~ Full of wisdom—men who were prudent in their approach to people and problems, able to judge a situation correctly and follow the best course of action for the people. Judicious men.

TEACHING TIP: This situation is reminiscent of Moses and his need for help in serving the children of Israel well. He too used good men to be his co-laborers. (Exodus 18:17-22)

- The people approved of this church plan, and they chose seven men. (Acts 6:5)
 1. Stephen—a man full of faith and wisdom, empowered by the Holy Spirit.
 2. Philip—an evangelist who had a multi-faceted ministry as we have learned in earlier lessons in our Acts study.
 3. Prochorus
 4. Nicanor
 5. Timon
 6. Parmenas
 7. Nicolas

TEACHING TIP: These five men were Hellenists. We know little about them, other than their names and that they were chosen for this specific role.

⇒ **Each of these men had to have integrity and an impeccable character to be entrusted with not only serving the people but handling the money as well.**

- The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them, which symbolized the bestowing of a blessing and a sign of appointment for service.

⇒ **The triumph over an internal, in-house problem resulted in a new breakthrough in evangelistic power!**

- The Word of God kept on spreading. The number of disciples continued to increase in Jerusalem, including a great number of priests (who worked daily in the temple.)

TEACHING TIP: Consider these Jewish priests coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Their eyes were being opened by the gospel! They began to recognize and understand that the daily sacrifices they performed pointed to the Lamb of God—Jesus. Surely the Jewish leaders viewed these priests as traitors to their faith. Could this possibly have spurred on the angry opposition that arose against Stephen?

- In Acts 6:8 we learn more about Stephen. He was a man full of grace and power, performing great wonders and signs among the people.

TEACHING TIP: Stephen manifested grace in a religious world of works.

→ **NOTE:** There will always be opposition when God’s people are serving Him and His Word is being spread.

- Opposition came to Stephen through a group called the ‘Synagogue of the Freedmen.’
 - ~ These were descendants of Jewish slaves who had previously been in bondage to Rome but were now free.
 - ~ They now had settled in Jerusalem and were large enough to have a synagogue of their own.
- They sought to argue with Stephen but were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. (Acts 6:10)
- Unable to make a case against Stephen’s preaching, they stirred up the people, the elders, and the teachers of the Law by producing false witnesses against Stephen. (Just like Jesus experienced.)
- The confrontation elevated from an informal dispute to a more formal legal interrogation as Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

TEACHING TIP: Do not miss v15—as Stephen stood before them falsely accused, the council did not see fear or defensiveness or anger in him, rather they saw his face like the face of an angel.

Study Two:

Acts 7:1-34

Stephen Speaks to the Sanhedrin

TEACHING TIP: Have you ever heard of a ‘kangaroo court?’ It is a court that ignores recognized standards of law or justice. Those in control intentionally disregard the court’s legal or ethical obligations. Proceedings often give the ‘appearance’ of a fair and just trial, even though the verdict has already been determined before the trial begins.

This is the environment in which Stephen stood; the odds were against him in this court. Yet, he had the Holy Spirit empowering him to testify with confidence and courage.

- In Acts 7:1 the high priest asked, “*Are these things so?*” In other words, ‘how do you plead?’
 - Stephen was arrested for blasphemy, speaking against Moses and the temple. (Again, just like Jesus.)
- ⇒ **In the longest sermon in the book of Acts (7:1-53) Stephen focused on Israel’s history; he gave a detailed defense of the Old Testament (the Council’s favorite subject).**
- **NOTE:** In this hostile environment Stephen addressed them as brothers and fathers—descriptors of a personal relationship.

TEACHING TIP: A relationship. Isn’t that what God wants with His people?

God’s Covenant with Abraham—Acts 7:1-7

- He began his discourse with God’s appearance and promise to Abraham which is recorded in Genesis 12:1-9.
 - ~ He reminded them of the incredible instruction Abraham was given—leave behind everything familiar, your family, your land, your home. God told Abraham to leave it all behind to follow Him to a land (a life) that He would show Abraham. (Acts 7:2b-4).
 - ~ He pointed back to God’s promise to Abraham—a promise of both land and descendants, even when Abraham had no children. (Acts 7:5)
- Stephen shared the harsh reality that God said His people would suffer slavery and mistreatment in a foreign land for four hundred years.
 - ~ His audience knew this had occurred. It is recorded in Genesis 15:13. (Acts 7:6-7)
- He basically recapped the history of the Abrahamic Covenant that had been commemorated through the physical act of circumcision—this was the ‘sign’ of the Abrahamic covenant. It was an outward sign of an inward heart reality—a sign of something already true by faith.
 - ~ Abraham became the father of Isaac. Isaac became the father of Jacob. Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs (tribes of Israel) which included his sons, twelve brothers.

The Story of Joseph—Acts 7:9-16

- In Acts 7:9, Stephen continued their history through the story of Joseph and how the Jews ultimately moved to Egypt.
 - ~ The patriarchs, Joseph’s brothers, became jealous of him because he was their father’s favorite.
 - ~ They disliked his tendency to tattle-tale on them.
 - ~ He also had big dreams that made his big brothers feel small.

- ~ The brothers' jealousy led to a shocking action—they sold their own brother to merchants passing by their camp.
- ~ From there Joseph was then sold as a slave in Egypt.

→ **NOTE:** It seemed Joseph would be all but forgotten in Egypt, just a tragic family footnote.

- Stephen continued the story, sharing how God was with Joseph. (See Genesis 39-50)
 - ~ God rescued Joseph from all his afflictions and granted him wisdom and favor.
 - ~ Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was having dreams that mystified him. Joseph was able to interpret these dreams with God's help.
 - * They concerned seven fruitful years followed by seven years of famine in the land.
 - * Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he put him in charge of all his personal affairs and those of the entire country!

TEACHING TIP: What a story this is! We see how a dysfunctional family not only impacted a family member's life (Joseph's), but the nation's very history.

TEACHING TIP: From false accusations to unjust imprisonment, it would seem all was lost, but Joseph's big childhood dreams were part of God's plans to deliver His people!

- In Acts 7:11-16 Stephen completed sharing the history of Joseph.
 - ~ The famine did come into the land.
 - ~ Because of Joseph, the people (including his family living in Canaan) found food in Egypt.
 - ~ Joseph invited Jacob, his father, and all his relatives to live in Egypt. Seventy-five did.
 - ~ Joseph, the deliverer, ultimately revealed his identity to his brothers.

→ **NOTE:** Joseph was not only critical to the survival of his family, but to all the families of Egypt.

- In Acts 7:17-18 Stephen related that Abraham's ancestors thrived in Egypt; they grew in number. All was going well UNTIL—a major shift occurred with a new king who came into power and knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done.
 - ~ This ruler dealt treacherously with God's people. Why?
 1. He was threatened at the continued growth in the population of God's people in 'his' land. Jacob's family had grown from seventy-five to approximately two million!
 2. He feared that they could successfully revolt against his leadership and power.
 - ~ The new king commanded Hebrew midwives kill boy infants at birth. (Exodus 1:15-22)

⇒ **Stephen was building his case from the Book of Exodus—a book that these Jewish spiritual leaders held sacred.**

The Story of Moses (Part 1)—Acts 7:20-34

- Stephen turned to the story of Moses and how he was used in the deliverance of God's people.
 - Moses was born to Hebrew parents who lived under the tyranny of the new Egyptian king. They feared Moses would be discovered and killed, as the king had mandated.
 - At approximately three months old, his mother put Moses in a reed basket and placed him in the river where he was found by Pharaoh's daughter. She adopted him, educated him, and nurtured him as her own son.
- ⇒ **Only God could orchestrate such a turn of events for Moses. Instead of being killed at birth or dying on the river, he grew into a man of power in wisdom and deeds ... in the king's palace!**
- Stephen related how Moses' life changed drastically at the age of forty when God moved in his heart to visit his brethren, the enslaved Jews.
 - ~ He saw one being treated unjustly, and in defending the man, Moses killed an Egyptian.
 - ~ He assumed that his brethren would consider his defense as 'God sent,'
 - ~ The Israelite slaves, however, did not understand; and Moses realized his life was at risk.

Study Three:

Acts 7:35-53 Stephen Indicts His Hearers

The Story of Moses (Part 2)—Acts 7:35-53

- Stephen continued to share the story of Moses—
 - ~ He fled and became an alien in the land of Midian. There he became a father of two sons.
 - ~ Forty more years passed and then "GOD I AM" appeared to him in the wilderness on Mt. Sinai in the flame of a burning bush.
 - * God had heard and seen the oppression of his people in Egypt.
 - * It was time to deliver them, rescue them, and Moses was His chosen man for the task!
 - ~ Moses returned to Egypt and there performed wonders and signs in the land; he led the people of Israel out of bondage, crossing the Red Sea.
 - ~ Moses led them in the wilderness for forty years due to the peoples' disobedience to God.

⇒ **Stephen reminded his audience that Moses was the one who spoke with God on Mt. Sinai, who received living oracles to pass on to God’s people, but our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him. Moses was sent to be a ruler and deliverer.**

▪ In Stephen’s relating of their history, he reminded the court how quickly their forefathers had been willing to forget the ‘slavery’ from which they had escaped.

▪ Stephen recalled their history of disobedience and rejection of God. (Acts 7:39-43)

- ~ They chose a golden calf over the great ‘I AM’ who had performed miracle after miracle in their deliverance.
- ~ They sacrificed to idols and rejoiced over the works of their hands.

TEACHING TIP: The people had a God-ordained leader and God’s presence with them, yet they still rebelled and rejected God’s will.

▪ In Acts 7:44 Stephen turned to the building of the Tabernacle.

- ~ Their fathers had the tabernacle (a portable building) in the wilderness.
- ~ It was a symbol of God’s presence with them.

TEACHING TIP: King David found favor in God’s eyes and wanted to build a dwelling place for God; but it was his son, Solomon, who built a house for God.

→ **NOTE:** Look at verse 48. It begins with a very important word— ‘however.’ Stephen addressed the accusation made against him of blaspheming the temple of God.

✠ Acts 7:48 *“However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands ...”*

▪ Stephen’s passion was that they understood God was greater than the physical temple.

- ~ God, the Creator, could not be confined to a building.

⇒ **Stephen’s point: he had not spoken against the temple—he spoke against the way Israel worshiped the temple of God instead of the God of the temple.**

▪ Stephen then condemned the Jewish leaders for rejecting God’s messengers.

✠ Acts 7:51-53 *“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels and yet did not keep it.”*

TEACHING TIP: God referred to the Israelites as “stiff-necked” nine times in the Old Testament. Now Stephen pointed a finger at his audience, the Sanhedrin Council, and called them the same.

- Stephen used their history as a mirror, reflecting the truth about these Jewish leaders.
 - ~ They were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.
 - ~ They prided themselves on their obedience to the law yet refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them.
- These Jewish leaders were jealous over their law and could not understand how Christ had come to fulfill the law.
- ⇒ **Their ears did not hear; their hearts did not receive; and their necks did not bow to the truth. Men filled with ‘self’ were no match for a Spirit-filled man.**
- Hard hearts are hard to reach. Their rage became an ungoverned mob.

“Do not presume that I [Jesus] came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” (Matthew 5:17)

Study Four:

Acts 7:54-8:3 Stephen Dies, Saul Appears, and the Church Scatters

- Stephen’s sermon provoked a strong reaction and became his death warrant.
 - ~ No vote was taken. Yet, their anger gave birth to Stephen’s death.
- Not wanting to defile their hall with his blood, they dragged him outside the city; and there they stoned Stephen to death. (Acts 7:58)
- As he died, Stephen prayed that they might be forgiven— just like his Master, Jesus, had prayed.
- Acts 7:60 presents a beautiful picture of a believer’s death— *“... he [Stephen] fell asleep.”*

TEACHING TIP: Stephen was the first martyr of the church. A martyr is a person who willingly suffers death rather than renounce their faith.

TEACHING TIP: As you read through this passage, notice the contrast. The calmness, trust, peace, and confidence of Stephen versus the fury, frustration, and anger of the mob.

⇒ **Stephen had learned the lesson of patience under injustice from his Lord and Master.**

- Go back to vv55-56. There is something very profound presented here— *“But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’”*

TEACHING TIP: Standing! Jesus was standing! The Scriptures repeatedly picture Jesus as seated at the right hand of God; but here, Jesus who was watching from heaven, stood, waiting to welcome Stephen home.

“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10c)

- ⇒ **From a human perspective, we could view the death of Stephen as a tragedy and premature. But he had fully accomplished the work that the Father had planned for him.**

ILLUSTRATION: The story of Jim Elliot is also one of a seemingly premature death of a godly man. In 1956 he was killed in Ecuador at the hands of the Auca Indians (the name means ‘savage’)—he was only twenty-eight years old.

From a young age, missions stirred the heart of Jim Elliot. The group he desired to reach for Jesus Christ were the Auca Indians who were considered one of the most violent unreached people groups. Jim and four others ministered to this group as missionaries, learning their language; and sending supplies and gifts. In an unimaginable turn of events, the Auca Indians turned on these men and savagely murdered them.

In an interview with the pilot’s son, Steve Saint— *“I learned all the men were armed, but when they were attacked by this group, they did not defend themselves against them.”*

If the Auca Indians had hoped to terrify the families of these men into leaving, they failed. Jim’s wife Elisabeth, their young daughter Valerie, and one of the missionaries’ sister, Rachel Saint, willingly chose to make their home among the very people who killed their loved ones. For two years they lived in their community, learning their language, and translating the Bible for them. Their testimony of kindness and forgiveness convinced the Auca Indians of God’s love for them, and many came to Christ. Elisabeth Elliot taught them to forgive fearlessly and to love tremendously.

- ⇒ **Jim Elliot wrote in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.”**

- The spilling of Stephen’s blood marked a major turning point and a defining moment in the life of the church. It led to increased and severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem.
 - ~ All believers except the apostles were scattered to nearby regions.

TEACHING TIP: Persecution helped spread the Gospel to surrounding areas and paved the way for the Gentiles to hear it.

- ⇒ **The Jewish leaders could not bury Stephen’s influence; instead, it spread.**
- ~ The blood of Stephen (and men like Jim Elliot) became the seed of the church to grow. Their short lives bore much fruit.
- The first reference to Saul is found in Acts 7:58—we encounter a man as devoted to persecuting Christians as Stephen was devoted to Christ.

An Introduction to Paul

- ~ The son of Hebrew parents, of the tribe of Benjamin.
- ~ Trained and skilled in the best traditions of Judaism and Jewish theology.
- ~ A citizen of Tarsus, thus familiar with Greek culture, philosophies, and language.
- ~ A Roman citizen with all the advantages.
- ~ Trained in a secular trade, so able to support himself.
- ~ His strong intellectual gift was energized by a strong temperament that knew nothing of half measures.
- ~ He was a zealous persecutor of the church. He took pleasure in attacking Christians.
- In Acts 8:1,3 the ferocity of Saul’s attitude toward believers in the early church was manifested through his actions toward believers.
 - ~ First, he heartily approved of Stephen’s stoning.
 - ~ Then, he went after the church members with relentless savagery.
- ✚ Acts 8:3 *“But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”*

TEACHING TIP: ‘Ravaging’ means to injure severely, harm, damage, ruin, destroy. Saul wanted the early church eliminated.

TEACHING TIP: The memory of Stephen’s stoning probably stayed with Saul for the rest of his days. No doubt Stephen’s message and his glorious death were used by God to prepare Saul for his own meeting with Jesus.

⇒ **The Christians’ killer would become the Christians’ leader.**

Study Five:

Overview The World Turned Upside Down

- **NOTE:** There are no teacher notes for this day of study. The leader will facilitate the discussion of the questions the group answered in the workbook.
- After Stephen’s stoning and death, the first wave of persecution in the church began—as believers fled, the spread of the Gospel also began!
- ⇒ **Instead of wiping out the church, the efforts to destroy it aided the plan of God, spreading the Good News to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world.**

APPLICATION: The Holy Spirit can empower us with His wisdom and understanding to reach outside our familiar surroundings (our local church) to those in our daily spheres of influence (whether that be at school or work or at a sporting event) and bring them the gospel message.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- ✦ **God works mightily through pain.**
 - ⚙ Oftentimes, suffering is a school in which we are taught invaluable lessons.
 - ⚙ Learn all you can. Journal the experience.

- ✦ **As followers of Christ, we must be people of courage and conviction.**
 - ⚙ God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be “living sacrifices.” (Romans 12:1-2)
 - ⚙ We can be brave in speaking the truth, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- ✦ **How far are you willing to go for what you believe?**
 - ⚙ Will I live, speak as Christ did?
 - ⚙ Will I, like Stephen, be willing to die for my faith, in the name of Jesus Christ?

- ✦ **We need to look beyond the obstacles, problems, perils, and enemies to see the Savior who died for us and now STANDS with open arms waiting to welcome us home.**