

Acts 1 Study and Discussion Questions

Lesson Two: Stephen's Martyrdom and the Resulting Diaspora – Acts 6-8, James

Read Acts 6.

- 1) List the characteristics of Stephen, stated and implied, in Acts 6. **Stephen was full of the Spirit and wisdom (6:3, 10), full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5), willing to serve (implied by 6:5-6), respected by the apostles (implied by 6:5), full of God's grace and power (6:8), a performer of wonders and miraculous signs (6:8), a gifted apologist (6:9-10), bold (implied in 6:9-10), and had a face like that of an angel when he stood trial before the Sanhedrin (6:15).**
- 2) What charges were brought against Stephen? **The charges were that Stephen claimed the Temple would be destroyed (by Jesus) and that the Law of Moses would be changed (by Jesus). His accusers claimed he "spoke against" these things (6:13), meaning that he blasphemed God and Moses (verse 11).**
- 3) What practical responsibility could you assume or delegate in order that someone in your home or church might focus on his or her most important area of spiritual giftedness? **Personal sharing**

Read Acts 7.

- 4) Stephen gave the Sanhedrin a short history lesson. Re-examine his speech, looking for the statements and implied accusations that would have offended the Jewish leaders. **Stephen accused the Jews of historically rejecting those whom God appointed (7:9, 25-27, 35, 39, 40, 51-52), ignoring the fact that there is "progress and change in God's program"¹ (throughout his entire speech, but especially verses 2, 15, 45-47), and misunderstanding the purpose and necessity of their land, the Temple, and the Law (their forefathers had served the Lord outside the land, before they had the Law, and with or without the Temple [7:9, 22, 38, 44-50]).**
- 5) Review the accusations made against Stephen (Acts 6:11, 13-14). The high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" (7:1) Did Stephen deny or affirm the truth of the accusations against him in his speech (offer support for your answer)? **Rather than addressing the charges about the Temple and the Law specifically, Stephen redirected his audience to the heart of the matter: the prophets had worshipped and served God worthily, with or without these tools. With regard to Jesus, their forefathers had always rejected the prophets and their teaching. They themselves had betrayed and murdered Him. Thus, Stephen affirmed the charges against him with regard to his proclamation of Jesus' authority but denied that his teachings were blasphemous.**
- 6) Acts 6:3, 5 and 7:55 describe Stephen as a man who was full of the Holy Spirit.
 - a) What things are characteristic of a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1:67-68, 10:21, Acts 4:31, 13:52, Galatians 5:22-23, and Ephesians 5:18-21)? **Spirit-filled individuals are characterized by joy, praise, thanksgiving, and bold proclamation of the Gospel. In Galatians, Paul lists the "fruit of the Spirit:" love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In the Ephesians verse, the joy of being full of the Holy Spirit is contrasted with a sinful substitute, drunkenness. Other characteristics are joyful singing, speaking encouraging words, and submitting to one another.**

¹ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Ac 7:2–53). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

- b) Ephesians 5:18 commands that believers be filled with the Spirit. Any command suggests some participation on our part. In its context, this command also suggests that the filling of the Spirit is something that can occur repeatedly (differentiating it from receiving the Holy Spirit [or being baptized with the Holy Spirit], which is a one-time, permanent gift of God, given at the moment of our salvation). According to Romans 8:4-5, what must we regularly put to death in order to be filled with the Holy Spirit? **Those who are filled with the Holy Spirit regularly put their flesh (the sinful nature) to death. By removing all known sin from our lives (not only sinful behaviors but also sinful attitudes), we create space for the Holy Spirit to fill. All true believers have the Holy Spirit, but when we sin, we grieve Him and are no longer completely controlled by Him.**
- c) Put yourself in Stephen's place. What temptations could have prevented you (and do sometimes prevent you) from responding as a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit and as Stephen did in Acts 7? **Personal sharing**

Read Acts 8.

- 7) Compare Acts 8:1, 4 with Acts 1:8. How did Stephen's death result in a partial fulfillment of the charge of Jesus? **Stephen's death was followed by a wave of persecution that forced the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to scatter outside Jerusalem to the very places Jesus named (Judea and Samaria). Acts 8:4 says that those who left Jerusalem "preached the word wherever they went."**
- 8) Carefully consider Acts 8:14-17, 10:44-46, 11:19-23, and 19:1-7. What possible explanation can you glean from these passages about why, at least on a number of occasions, the receiving of the Holy Spirit was delayed from conversion and was accompanied by the visible sign of tongues? **Apparently, the Church (and Luke's readership) needed assurance that God had truly approved the conversion of Samaritans and Gentiles into what (up until that time) had been considered a Jewish faith (Jesus was a Jew). The sign of tongues left no question. It was also affirming to the new believers, who, at that time, were without the New Testament teachings. The gift of tongues gave the Church confirmation, thus breaking down old prejudices and enlightening the Jewish believers concerning God's plan to build His church without favoritism (miracles were also given to the apostles and evangelists for the purpose of confirming God's message to unbelievers and believers alike [Acts 8:6-8]). However, not all of those who received Christ and His Holy Spirit spoke in tongues (11:19-23).**
- 9) What was different about Philip's evangelistic work in Samaria (8:5-8) from that described in 8:26-38? Christ's servants must be flexible. In what ways is the Lord asking you, His servant, to be flexible at the present? **Philip first witnessed north of Jerusalem in Samaria. There, entire crowds were converted. Later, he witnessed in the south to one lone Ethiopian man. In the first account, the impact of both Philip's preaching and miracles are emphasized. In the second account, a careful explanation of the Scripture led to the eunuch's conversion. Personal sharing**

Read James 1:1 – 3:12.

- 10) It is difficult to know exactly what prompted James to write his epistle. It is possible that the believers to whom he wrote were suffering trials brought on them by wealthy individuals (1:2, 9-12; 2:6-7; 5:1-8, 10). Make a list of the topics James covers in 1:1-3:12 and then explain how each topic could be helpful to a believer who was suffering at the hands of the wealthy. (As an example, the first set of verses is done for you. The chart continues on to the next page of the lesson.)

TOPICS COVERED IN JAMES 1:1 – 3:12	THE APPLICATION OF THE TOPIC FOR THOSE SUFFERING OPPRESSION BY THE WEALTHY
Trials and the positive outcomes that can result from perseverance (1:2-4, 12)	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to persevere.

From 1:5-7 Asking for wisdom	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to pray for wisdom.
From 1:9-11 The need for humility in whatever position we hold	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to respond with humility.
From 1:13-15 The need to consider the source of our temptations	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to carefully consider the origin of any temptation to respond poorly.
From 1:19-27 Self-control and conformity to God’s word	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to respond without anger and keep a tight rein on their tongues.
From 2:1-4, 8-11 with 2:5-7 Not favoring the wealthy, especially since they were the ones causing persecution	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to respond with integrity (not privately fearing or detesting them while outwardly favoring them)
From 2:12-13 Being merciful rather than condemning	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to respond with mercy
From 2:14-26 The need to demonstrate the genuineness of one’s faith by good deeds *	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to prove the legitimacy of their faith by with good deeds
From 3:1-12 A controlled tongue as evidence of self-control in all areas	Those facing persecution by wealthy oppressors ought to demonstrate control of their own tongues

*2:14-26 (on deeds substantiating faith) may also have been addressed to the wealthy (who could have been professing believers within the Church), reminding them of their need to examine their deeds for evidence of genuine, saving faith. What did their exploitation of their poorer brothers and sisters say about their faith? That it was “dead”?

- 11) What important point about faith does James make in James 2:14-26? Would you say this contradicts Romans 1:17, Romans 4 (see especially verses 2-5, 13-15), and Ephesians 2:8, 9? How can the ideas be reconciled? James says faith apart from deeds is “dead.” Paul emphasizes that faith alone is what saves us. When the canon of the New Testament was being compiled, many argued against including the Book of James, believing it contradicted the doctrine of salvation by faith alone (a clear Pauline teaching). However, the two ideas are not contradictory but complementary. Placing our faith firmly in Christ alone is what saves us. However, good works will inevitably result from saving faith. Where good works are absent, true, saving faith does not exist.
- 12) Looking back at the topics you listed in your answer to question 10, which one quality or action has recently proved the strongest evidence of your faith and which have you exhibited the least? **Personal sharing**

Read James 3:13 – 5:20.

- 13) Find words, phrases, or ideas that James used to contrast two ways of living in the following passages:
 - a) 3:14-16 and 3:17-18 **Motives (wisdom) driven by selfish ambition and envy versus motives (wisdom) that are pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, merciful, impartial, and sincere**
 - b) 4:1-3 and 4:6-10 **Asking God for things with wrong motives (covetous desires) versus asking in humility**
 - c) 4:13, 16 and 4:14-15 **Boasting about intentions/goals versus humble planning in light of God’s calendar**

- 14) Reread James 5:19-20. Perhaps these closing words reflect another reason James wrote his letter (to restore his readers to truth). Try to summarize ways he attempted to do this, based especially on your findings in Questions 10 and 13. **Throughout the epistle, James painted a picture of two ways to respond to persecution and trials: a heavenly response and an earthly response. James hoped to turn his brothers and sisters away from fleshly responses and toward peace-loving, self-controlled, and godly responses that would “raise a harvest of righteousness” (3:18).**
- 15) Which two Old Testament figures are named in James 5 (include verse numbers)? Which Biblical word summarizes what James says each man exemplified (a different word for each man)? For what would you like to be known? **Job (verse 11) exemplifies perseverance. Elijah (verse 17) exemplifies prayer. Personal sharing.**