

# Session #7: Acts Chapter 7:54-

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## **Stephen is Martyred for the Faith 7:54-8:1a**

### **7:55 *Jesus standing at the right hand of God***

Stephen having finished his testimonial he now stands bathed in the Spirit of God and as such has a vision that fulfills the words of Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1, but most importantly the prophecy of Jesus Christ himself: *But from this time on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God* (Luke 22:69, Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62). In Stephen's vision Jesus is not sitting but standing and one can suspect that is because Jesus is coming towards Stephen to welcome His good and faithful servant into the Kingdom of Heaven.

### **7:57 *cover their ears***

In the ignorance of the Sanhedrin and their rage they believe that Stephen to have blasphemed, to speak against the truth of God which is sinful for them to even hear. So they demonstrate their unwillingness to participate in this speech by plugging their ears. Stephen has scandalized the court. But in this moment they are also fulfilling the words of God told through the prophet Isaiah concerning those who are so corrupt that they are incapable of hearing or seeing the acts, work or words of God. (Isaiah 6:9-10)

### **7:58 *and stoned him***

It was against the rules set by Rome for any government in their rule to carry out capital punishment but the crowd took matters into their own hands. Stoning was (and continues to this day in some parts of the world) is a cruel way to die. Depending on the crowd it could take 20 minutes up to two hours contingent on how much the crowd wanted the individual to suffer.

### ***laid down their cloaks at the feet...Saul***

Scholars believe that St. Luke wants us as the readers to see the full conversion of this man Saul, who would later become known as Paul so he lets us know that Saul/Paul was witness in this moment. Most scholars agree that there is nothing more here in the act of laying down garments than then desire to free their arms up so as to be unhindered in the action of throwing. St. Luke using this reality to bring Saul/Paul into the scene. What we don't know is if the death of Stephen was the beginning of the conversion of Saul/Paul.

### **7:59 *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit***

Stephen has truly taken to heart the teachings of Jesus and seriously his desire to follow him. We see in Stephen's death a mirror of Jesus. First we have both being taken out of the city, and then in two statements. *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit* on the lips of Stephen echoes the words of Jesus on the cross as He breathed His last (Luke 23:46). And we have the desire to forgive those who have caused their deaths we read in verse 60 of this chapter which Jesus also says in Luke 23:34. The estimated death of St. Stephen is 35/36 AD

## **The Persecution of the Church 8:1b-3**

What we now move to in chapter eight is the deepening of the persecution of the Church. What was once done just against the leadership of this fledgling community now fans out to all its membership. While we have no scriptural basis for this, some scholars submit the idea that this persecution was

limited to the Hellenist Jews of the Freedman Synagogue since it is very probable this is the home Church of St. Stephen. This suggestion comes because of the statement at the end of verse one that says *all were scattered... except the Apostles*.

**8:1 they are all scattered**

What does one do when one's life is threatened? Most move to safety and in this case that means leaving Jerusalem. So these first Christians run to Judea and Samaria. We learn later in Acts (11:19) they go to Phoenicia, Syria and Antioch. The amazing thing is rather than driving these believers into hiding this movement brings about a new phase of missionary activity for the early Church (8:4). We should not assume that these men and women left Jerusalem out of fear (although we can be sure that preserving life was a big part of it). Scholars suggest that, in the eyes of faith, we can believe that most realized that evangelizing as many as they could was to be the core of their life for the remainder of their life. Seeing the writing on the wall they understood that if they were to carry out their calling now was as good a time as any to be about the business of God in safer lands.

**except the Apostles**

So why were the Apostles left alone? One theory was offered in the introductory comments to this section, but there is another idea as well. Some scholars suggest it goes back to what the great rabbi Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin to do in Acts 5:38 – to leave these men alone and allow time to determine whether this movement is of God or not.

**8:3 Saul... was trying to destroy the church**

So who is Saul/Paul? He was born in the city of Tarsus, in the southeastern corner of modern day Turkey. From the Letter to the Romans (11:1) and Philippians (3:5) we know that Saul/Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin. As a student he studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and therefore we can surmise was a Pharisee. Finally, we know that Saul/Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-27). In this moment of the story of faith Saul/Paul is a zealot for the "true" Jewish faith and sees these Christians as a threat. So he does what he can to destroy the community. The words in Greek used are translated to "made havoc" and give the image of a wild boar ravaging. Paul was out for blood.

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## Philip Proclaims the Gospel in Samaria 8:5-8

With the Christians leaving Jerusalem we move into the second stage of the development of the early Church. First we have the gift of the Holy Spirit and those first converts. Second is the leaving from the city walls of Jerusalem. State three will be the founding of the Church in Antioch (Syria).

**8:5 Philip** We first met Philip in Chapter 6. He is one of the seven selected as the first Deacons of the Church. Later in Acts 8 we will hear of Philip meeting an important Ethiopian eunuch to whom he proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ, converting and baptizing him. In chapter 21 we read of St. Paul (accompanied by St. Luke) going up to Jerusalem for the last time. St. Paul stops in Caesarea and spends several days with Philip. It is believed by scholarship how St. Luke came to know of the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch and other elements of the early chapters of Acts.

**city of Samaria** Samaria was the capital city of what was the Northern Kingdom of Israel of the Old Testament times. After the conquest by the Assyrians in 8 BC most of the Israelites were taken as slaves. Those who remained in the area intermarried with Assyrians. Those Jews who intermarried took on Assyrian religious practice interweaving them with their Jewish rituals and became known as Samaritans. The Jews despised the Samaritans for their in-pure blood and the Samaritans disliked the Jews for their arrogance.

**8:6 gave heed to what he said** It is interesting to note that Jesus and the Apostles were not welcomed in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-53) but here we have Philip received and all interested in what he has to say. It is the despised Samaritans who become the first to benefit from the Gospel. Without planning it these early Christians are taking an important step away from the Jewish community by preaching to one and all.

## Simon the Magician 8:9-25

### Reflection Questions:

1. What is

## Catechism of the Catholic Church

Sacramen

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