

# THE DEACONS OF THE CHURCH

Acts 6:1–8:3

## Opening Thought

1) Someone has remarked: “Many North American Christians secretly believe in an unwritten rule. And that rule is this: If I live a moral life and if I faithfully serve God, He is somewhat obligated to protect me from anything really bad.”

Do you agree with this assessment? Do you know Christians who adhere to this way of thinking? Do you believe this rule? Why or why not?

---

---

---

---

## Background of the Passage

The rapid growth of the first-century church meant an influx of people. More people meant more needs and new ministries to meet those needs. New programs meant administrative and logistical problems that threatened to consume all the apostles’ time. Rather than neglect the spiritual disciplines of prayer and teaching God’s Word, the apostles called and commissioned a group of men to attend to the pressing needs of the body.

Stephen was one of the church’s newly appointed “deacons” (6:1–7). With Christ-like character, he ministered powerfully among the people, until the day he encountered a group of argumentative Jews. After he declared the truth about God to them, they told lies about him to the Jewish authorities. For faithfully discharging his duties as a believer, Stephen was arrested!

If Stephen was nervous as he stood before the high priest and powerful council of the Jews, he didn’t show it. He gave the religious leaders a concise review of Jewish history and then abruptly called them “stiff-necked” (verse 51) and accused the council of murdering the long-awaited Messiah (verse 52). This blunt and pointed sermon sent the Jews into a rage and resulted in the first martyrdom in church history. Stephen died as his Master had died, asking God to forgive his tormentors.

The martyrdom of Stephen seemed to escalate the Jews’ persecution of the followers of Christ. The man previously introduced as Saul (8:1a) proved to be a major leader in this widespread campaign of intolerance and terror. From a human perspective, this was an awful turn of events; from a divine perspective, everything resulted in a far greater good. The Christians who had been comfortable and perhaps a bit too complacent in Jerusalem were forced to scatter to the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. As they did, they carried out the command of 1:8, and the gospel began to be preached to Gentile audiences, who, for the most part, were receptive. Thus, in the midst of terrible persecution, the church actually grew!

## Bible Passage

Read 6:1—8:3, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

### Acts 6:1—8:3

- 1 *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.*
- 2 *Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.*
- 3 *"Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit 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 the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,*
- 6 *whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.*
- 7 *Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*
- 8 *And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.*
- 9 *Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.*
- 10 *And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*
- 11 *Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."*
- 12 *And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.*
- 13 *They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;*
- 14 *"for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."*
- 15 *And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.*
- 1 *Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"*
- 2 *And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran,*
- 3 *"and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.'*
- 4 *"Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.*
- 5 *"And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.*
- 6 *"But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years.*
- 7 *'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.'*
- 8 *"Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.*
- 9 *"And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him*
- 10 *"and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.*
- 11 *"Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.*
- 12 *"But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.*

13 *“And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to the Pharaoh.*

14 *“Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.*

15 *“So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers.*

16 *“And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.*

17 *“But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt*

18 *“till another king arose who did not know Joseph.*

19 *“This man dealt treacherously with our people, and oppressed our forefathers, making them expose their babies, so that they might not live.*

20 *“At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father’s house for three months.*

21 *“But when he was set out, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son.*

22 *“And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.*

23 *“Now when he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel.*

24 *“And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended and avenged him who was oppressed, and struck down the Egyptian.*

25 *“For he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand, but they did not understand.*

26 *“And the next day he appeared to two of them as they were fighting, and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren; why do you wrong one another?’*

27 *“But he who did his neighbor wrong pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’*

28 *‘Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?’*

29 *“Then, at this saying, Moses fled and became a dweller in the land of Midian, where he had two sons.*

30 *“And when forty years had passed, an Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai.*

31 *“When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him,*

32 *“saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look.*

33 *‘Then the LORD said to him, “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.*

34 *“I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.”’*

35 *“This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush.*

36 *“He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years.*

37 *“This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’*

38 *“This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us,*

39 *“whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,*

40 *“saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’*

41 *“And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.*

42 *“Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: ‘Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?*

43 *You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.’*

44 “Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it  
 45 according to the pattern that he had seen,  
 46 “which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the  
 47 Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,  
 48 “who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.  
 49 “But Solomon built Him a house.  
 50 “However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:  
 51 ‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what  
 52 is the place of My rest?  
 53 Has My hand not made all these things?’  
 54 “You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers  
 55 did, so do you.  
 56 “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the  
 57 Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,  
 58 “who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”  
 59 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.  
 60 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the  
 right hand of God,  
 and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”  
 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord;  
 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a  
 young man named Saul.  
 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”  
 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he  
 had said this, he fell asleep.

1 Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was  
 at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.  
 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.  
 3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women,  
 committing them to prison.

**multiplying** (v. 1)—By this point, the church may have numbered twenty thousand

**Hebrews ... Hellenists** (v 1) —The “Hebrews” were Jews from Palestine; the “Hellenists” were Jews from elsewhere in the Greek world.

**serve tables** (v. 2)—The word translated “tables” can refer to tables used in financial matters; whether the situation involved meals or money, the apostles did not want to neglect their top priorities.

**seven men** (v. 3)—a temporary solution to a pressing need, not an official “office” of deacons; that came later in the development of the church

**laid hands on them** (v. 6)—a symbolic act demonstrating affirmation, support, and identification

**Synagogue of the Freedman** (v. 9)—probably three separate synagogues comprised of the groups listed

**blasphemous words** (v. 11) —Unable to prevail over Stephen in a formal debate, these Jews resorted to deceit.

**face of an angel** (v. 15)—pure, calm, unruffled composure reflecting the presence of God

**high priest** (7:1)—probably Caiaphas

**four hundred years** (v. 6)—an approximate figure; see Genesis 15:13–14

**twelve patriarchs** (v. 8)—the twelve sons of Jacob, who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel

**expose their babies** (v. 19)—only the male children

**he was forty years old** (v. 23) —Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh’s court, forty years in exile in Midian, and forty years leading the Exodus and Israel’s wilderness wanderings.

**would not obey** (v. 39)—Israel would not follow Moses’s leadership and yearned to return to slavery in Egypt.

**God ... gave them up to worship the host of heaven** (v. 42)—God abandoned the people to their sin of idolatry.

**tabernacle of witness** (v. 44) —the predecessor of the temple

**stiff-necked** (v. 51)—obstinate, like their forefathers

**uncircumcised in heart and ears!** (v. 51)—thus, as unclean before God as the uncircumcised Gentiles

**resist the Holy Spirit** (v. 51) —by rejecting the Spirit’s messengers and their message

**gnashed ... with their teeth** (v. 54)—in anger and frustration

**laid down their clothes ... Saul** (v. 54)—Paul’s first appearance in Scripture reveals him to be deeply involved in this sordid, murderous scene

**stoned** (v. 59)—the legal punishment for blasphemy; however this was not a legal execution but an act of mob violence

**do not charge them with this sin** (v. 60)—a Christ-like plea for his killers’ forgiveness

**he fell asleep** (v. 60)—a common New Testament euphemism for the death of believers

**scattered** (8:1)—Thus began a widespread persecution of Christians that caused many to flee Jerusalem.

**made havoc** (v. 3)—a verb used in extrabiblical Greek writings to refer to the destruction of a city or mangling by a wild animal

## Understanding the Text

2) What situation prompted the leaders of the early church to take steps to organize more efficiently and to appoint Stephen and others to special positions of service?

---

---

---

---

3) Pastor MacArthur writes: “Biblical church organization always responds to needs and to what the Spirit is already doing. To organize a program and then expect the Holy Spirit to get involved in it is to put the cart before the horse. We dare not try to force the Spirit to fit our mold. Organization is never an end itself but only a means to facilitate what the Lord is doing in His church.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

---

---

---

---

4) What were the requirements for the men chosen to lead the church in serving ministries? Why did the apostles list these qualities?

---

---

---

---

5) How would you characterize Stephen's message to the Jews? Was it "seeker sensitive"? "user friendly"? Was it hotheaded? misguided?

What were Stephen's major points?

---

---

---

---

## **Cross Reference**

Read Jeremiah 4:20–31.

## **Exploring the Meaning**

6) In what ways was Jeremiah's divine task similar to the situation Stephen faced?

---

---

---

---

7) Read Jeremiah 7:23–28. What did God say the results would be when Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed the truth of God to the people of Israel? What implications does this hold for modern-day Christians called to share the truth of the gospel with a pagan culture?

---

---

---

---

8) What happened immediately following Stephen's death? Did his murder placate those who were opposed to the gospel? Who led the way in this attempt to squelch the spread of Christianity?

---

---

---

---

### Summing Up ...

“At first glance, Stephen's death may seem pointless. Here was a promising career cut short. ... His ministry seems to have ended in failure. Not only was he killed as a heretic, but his death also triggered the first persecution against the entire church. That persecution, spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus, scattered the Jerusalem fellowship. Such a skewed view of Stephen's death, however, betrays a lack of understanding of the way the Holy Spirit works. The persecution, which seemed to be a negative, was in reality a positive factor. It led to the first great missionary outreach by the early church. Satan's attempt to stamp out the church's fire merely scattered the embers and started new fires around the world. In the words of the early church Father Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church.”—*John MacArthur*

### Reflecting on the Text

9) If your church were beginning a new ministry and looking for people to lead it, do you think your name would be mentioned as a possible candidate? Why or why not?

What character flaws might disqualify you from a position of public service? What practical, specific steps can you take to begin to address those failings?

---

---

---

---

10) Stephen's presentation of the gospel to the Jews might be labeled bold, even blunt. When is it appropriate to speak hard words to the lost, to be more confrontational regarding sin? Who in your life might benefit from such tough love?





---

---

---

---

---

**For further study, see the following passages:**

Genesis 12:4

Exodus 1:8

Exodus 2

Exodus 32:9

Exodus 34:29–35

Leviticus 8:14

Leviticus 24:16

Deuteronomy 10:22

Deuteronomy 18:15

Joshua 24:32

Psalms 29:3

Isaiah 6:1–3

Jeremiah 8:2

Amos 5:25–27

Matthew 21:12

Matthew 26:59–61

Mark 6:5

John 2:21

John 11:11–14

Acts 9:26–27

Romans 1:5

Galatians 3:19

1 Timothy 5:3–16