

The Church's First Leaders



SABBATH—JULY 21

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 6:8–15; Acts 7:1–53; Hebrews 5:11–14; Micah 6:1–16; Acts 7; Acts 8:4–25.

MEMORY VERSE: “The word of God was reaching more and more people. The group of followers in Jerusalem became larger and larger. Even a big group of Jewish priests [religious leaders] believed and obeyed” (Acts 6:7, ERV).

MANY JEWS accepted Jesus at Pentecost. Pentecost was the time when God poured the gift of His Holy Spirit on His church. God poured His Spirit on the church a short time after Jesus went to heaven. Many Jews who became Christians at Pentecost were Greek-speaking Jews who moved to Jerusalem (Acts 2:5, 9–11). These Jews were different from the Jews living in Judea that Luke talks about in Acts 6:1. The Greek-speaking Jews did not know the Aramaic language. But Jews who grew up in Judea spoke Aramaic.

The Greek-speaking Jews were different from the Jews born in Judea in other ways too. The Greek-speaking Jews were born in foreign countries. So, they did not have a deep understanding of Jewish ways of life. They did not understand the many different meetings for worship that happened at the temple in Jerusalem. They also did not follow Moses' law for Jews living in Israel.

But the Greek-speaking Jews were more willing than other Jews to accept God's command to share the Good News with non-Jews. God used many of these Greek-speaking Jews to share the Good News with everyone on the earth.



God used many Greek-speaking Jews to share the Good News with everyone on the earth.

SEVEN MEN ARE CHOSEN TO SERVE (Acts 6:1)

Read Acts 6:1. As these verses show us, what do the Greek-speaking Jewish believers complain about?

“They feel that the church leaders do not pay enough attention to the needs of the Greek widows. Every day the church gives help to members who need it. Any unfair action will not show God’s love. But Satan causes the Greek-speaking Jews to think the worst. So, the church leaders need to act fast to make sure that there is no more reason for anyone to feel unhappy with the way the church does things. If not, Satan will win in his plan to turn believers against each other.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 88, adapted.

The church leaders come up with an answer to the problem. They ask the Greek-speaking Jews to choose Seven men from their own group to be responsible for “ ‘getting food to people’ ” (Acts 6:2, ERV). This plan will let the leaders use all their time “ ‘to pray and to teach the word of God [the Bible]’ ” (Acts 6:4, ERV). The word written as “ ‘getting’ ” in Acts 6:2 (ERV) comes from the Greek word “diakoneo.” The word “ ‘teach’ ” in Acts 6:4 comes from the Greek word “diakonia.” These two words are spelled almost the same. But the words next to “diakoneo [getting]” and “diakonia [teach]” show us that these two Greek words have different meanings. For example, “ ‘food’ ” in Acts 6:2 shows us the meaning of “ ‘getting,’ ” while the wording “ ‘the word of God [the Bible]’ ” in Acts 6:4 shows us the meaning of “ ‘teach.’ ” These differences show us the things that are an important part of everyday life in the church. So, the church leaders share Jesus’ teachings with people. And the Seven men are responsible for everyday church life.



The Seven men are responsible for everyday church life.

Read Acts 6:2–6. How are the Seven men chosen and asked to serve?

The Seven men are also named deacons. They are men filled with God’s Spirit. First, the church leaders pray for the deacons. Then the leaders put their hands on the Seven men and ask God to bless them. This act shows that the church accepts the men to work as deacons.

Why is it important to live in peace and keep our thoughts busy with God’s work? How do we do that?

STEPHEN'S WORK FOR GOD (Acts 6:8–15)

Yesterday, we learned that the church chose Seven new leaders named deacons. The deacons work in the church and also witness to people outside of the church. They share the Good News with everyone who wants to know about it. Many new believers join the church (Acts 6:7). Then people from outside the church attack the church members. The book of Acts tells the story about what happens to a believer named Stephen during this time.

Read Acts 6:8–15. What do these verses teach us about Stephen, his faith, and who he is? Also, what does Stephen preach about that makes his attackers so angry?

Stephen is a Greek-speaking Jew. He shares the Good News in the Greek-speaking synagogues. Synagogues are Jewish “churches” or places of worship. There are many synagogues in the city of Jerusalem. Acts 6:9 talks about two of them. One synagogue has members who are Jews from the south. They come from Cyrene and Alexandria. The other synagogue is made up of Jews from the north. They come from Cilicia and Asia.

For sure, Jesus is the reason why people hurt Stephen. The attacks against Stephen show us that Stephen fully understands the Good News about Jesus. Stephen's understanding goes deeper than the understanding of the Jewish believers from Judea. Stephen's enemies accuse him of telling awful lies against Moses and God. In the enemies' minds, that is the same as attacking the law and the temple. Stephen scolds the Jewish leaders for loving the temple more than they love God (Acts 7:48).

The Jewish believers put too much value on the temple and its worship plan (Acts 3:1; Acts 15:1, 5; Acts 21:17–24). They find it hard to give these things up (Galatians 5:2–4; Hebrews 5:11–14). Stephen and many other Greek-speaking Jews know that Jesus' death means the end of the temple and its whole worship plan.

Should we hold on too tight to some of our beliefs about God? If we do hold too tight to our beliefs, what will happen when new light comes? How can we make sure we do not turn away from new truth in the same way that the Jewish leaders turned away from Jesus?



Jesus' death means the end of the temple and its whole worship plan.

STEPHEN'S TRIAL IN FRONT OF THE JEWS (Acts 7:1–53)

Read Acts 7:1–53. In these verses, what is Stephen saying to his attackers?

Stephen is arrested because he says that the Jews do not need to follow the laws about animals used in worship anymore. Moses gave these laws to the Jews many years ago. The Jews respect these laws. They respect the worship plan Moses gave them and good behavior. What happens when anyone says one of these things is no longer important? Then the Jews believe that person is insulting God.

Stephen's answer is the longest sermon in the book of Acts. Because Stephen's sermon is long, we see that Stephen's words are very important. At first, Stephen's sermon is about Israel's history. Stephen's topic may make us think that this information is old news. But we need to understand that prophets, special messengers, in Old Testament times often speak in this same way to God's people when they stop following God. These prophets often use the Old Testament Agreement between God and His people as an example, or model, for their own sermons. When that happens, these prophets use the Hebrew word "rīb." This word means that God is taking His people to court because they broke God's Special Agreement with them.

Let us look at an example of the word "rīb" in the Old Testament. The word "rīb" is used three times in Micah 6:1, 2. Micah uses the Agreement between God and His people at Mount Sinai as a model for his own speech to God's people. First, Micah asks Israel to remember all the wonderful things God did for His people (Micah 6:3–5). Next, Micah reminds Israel about what God asks them to do in His Agreement with them (Micah 6:6–12). Then, Micah warns Israel about the curses that will happen if they break God's Agreement (Micah 6:13–16).

Micah's sermon helps us understand why Stephen talks about Israel's history in his speech. Angry Jews ask Stephen to explain his behavior. But Stephen does not try to argue with these Jews about his faith or complain that their lies against him are false. Stephen starts to speak with a loud and strong voice. The Old Testament messengers did the same when they warned Israel that God was upset with them for breaking His Agreement. Stephen wants to remind the Jews that they do not obey God or thank Him enough for all He does for them.



The word "rīb" means that God is taking His people to court because they broke God's special agreement with them.

JESUS IN THE COURT IN HEAVEN (Acts 7:55, 56)

A prophet is a name for a special messenger. Stephen becomes a prophet when he announces that God has a problem with Israel. Yesterday, we learned that God's problem with Israel is a "legal action" that must be solved in court. This wording comes from the Hebrew word "rib." Sadly, Stephen works a very short time as a prophet. Why so short? Because he tells Israel about God's "rib," or problem with them. Then the Jews get very angry with Stephen. They do not want to listen to God's legal problem with them.

Read Acts 7:55, 56. In these verses, Stephen has a vision. What does Stephen's vision mean?

"Stephen shows the people that the special messages in the Bible about a Savior are about Jesus. Stephen says some things about the temple in Jerusalem that make the top Jewish religious leader angry. The top Jewish religious leader pretends to be very surprised and shocked by Stephen's words. This leader tears his clothing to show his shock. When the leader tears his clothing, Stephen knows that the Jews will soon kill him. Stephen sees that the Jews turn away from his words. Stephen knows he is giving his last message. That is why he stops his sermon in the middle of what he has to say."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 100, adapted.

Stephen stands in front of the Jewish leaders. At the same time, Jesus stands in heaven's sanctuary. Heaven's sanctuary is the place where God judges His people and works to save them. Jesus stands next to God the Father to show that the trial happening on the earth between Stephen and the Jewish leaders is really a "shadow" of the real trial. The real trial will happen in heaven between God and His enemies. God will judge the false teachers and leaders in Israel.

Do you see that Stephen does not beg Israel to go back to God? That part is missing from Stephen's sermon. But it is part of the other sermons before this time in the book of Acts (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31). Why is this part missing from Stephen's sermon? Because the Jews are no longer God's special people. God asked the Jews to share the gift of being saved with all the people on the earth. But from now on, Jesus' followers, both Jews and non-Jews, will go out of Jerusalem and share the Good News about being saved with everyone on the earth (Acts 1:8).



"The top Jewish religious leader tore his clothing to show his shock."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 100, adapted.

JESUS' FOLLOWERS SHARE THE GOOD NEWS (Acts 8:4–25)

The Jewish leaders win a big victory when they kill Stephen with stones. Stephen's death starts many other attacks against Jesus' followers in Jerusalem. Clearly, these attacks are started by the same group of people who kill Stephen. The leader of this group is named Saul. He does much to hurt the Christian church.

The Christians escape the attacks by moving to other towns in Judea and Samaria. Everywhere they go, they preach the Good News that Jesus saves humans from sin. Then Jesus' promise to His followers in Acts 1:8 comes true. They share the Good News everywhere in Judea and Samaria.

Read Acts 8:4–25. What lessons do we learn from the story in these verses?

The Samaritans were “half-Israelites.” What does that mean? It means that the Samaritans believed in only One God. They accepted the first five books of Moses. They practiced circumcision. Circumcision means the extra skin at the end of the male sex organ is cut off. They waited for the Savior to come. But in the Jews' eyes, the Samaritan religion was “spoiled” by some bad beliefs. So, in the eyes of the Jews, the Samaritans were not worthy of any of the promises that God gave Israel in His Special Agreement.

But when the Samaritans become Christians, the whole church in Jerusalem is shocked and surprised. So, the leaders of the church send Peter and John to find out if the story is true. God waits to pour His Spirit on the Samaritans until Peter and John get there (Acts 8:14–17). Why does God do that? Maybe God wants to show the church leaders that they need to fully accept the Samaritans as members of the church too (read Acts 11:1–18).

The church continues to grow after the Samaritans join. In Acts 8:27, we read about Philip and the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian came to Jerusalem to worship and now is going back home. He studies the Bible with Philip. Then the Ethiopian asks Philip to baptize him (Acts 8:38).

First the Samaritans, then the Ethiopian! The Good News is being taken to everyone on the earth, just as Jesus promised. But these two stories are just the start of what Jesus promised His followers in Acts 1. Soon, Jewish believers will travel everywhere on the earth and preach the Good News that Jesus saves us from our sins.



The Ethiopian asks Philip to baptize him (Acts 8:38).

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “The attacks against the church in Jerusalem helped Christians to share the Good News about Jesus everywhere on the earth. Jesus’ followers had much success in the work they did for God in Jerusalem. So, there was danger that they would stay there too long and not obey Jesus’ command to take the Good News to all people everywhere. Jesus’ followers forgot that the best way to fight against evil is to work very hard for God. These believers began to think their most important work was protecting the church in Jerusalem from the attacks of Satan. So, these believers did not teach new believers to take the Good News to people who had not heard it. Jesus’ followers were in danger of leading everyone in the church to be happy with what they already did. So, God allowed His church to be attacked. The attacks caused God’s people to move to many places far away from Jerusalem. Then these believers went everywhere and preached the word.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 105, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Read carefully the Ellen G. White quotation above. How is this quotation a warning for us as God’s people? How can we be sure that we are not protecting what we already have instead of sharing the Good News with everyone on the earth?
- 2 By the time Jesus went up to heaven, there were hundreds of years of hate between the Jews and the Samaritans. Some Bible experts think that Philip was a Greek-speaking Jew who grew up in a foreign country before he came to Jerusalem. What can we learn from the story about how Philip witnessed to the Samaritans? As Seventh-day Adventists, we have feelings of like and dislike for different groups of people too. But what should the Cross teach us about how all people are the same in God’s eyes? What does Jesus’ death for everyone teach us about the true value of every person?
- 3 Read about how Philip witnessed to the Ethiopian in Acts 8:27–30. How can we be open to more chances to share the Good News with other people?



“The attacks caused God’s people to move to many places far away from Jerusalem. Then these believers went everywhere and preached the Good News.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 105, adapted.