

# Learn to Read Acts Effectively

Distance Learning Programme

Session 4



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## Session 4

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Introduction and summary of Acts 6 and 7	Page 1
6 v 1 to 7 Welfare overseers appointed	1
6 v 8 to 15 Stephen accused of blasphemy	4
7 v 1 to 53 Stephen's address	7
7 v 54 to 60 Stephen's death	11
Old Testament references in Stephen's speech	13
Summary of Session 4	14
Questions	14
Self-study notes	15
Strong's Concordance definition	15

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# Session 4 - Stephen and his message to the council in Jerusalem Acts 6 and 7

## Introduction

In this session we will look at another problem which the first-century church had and how they dealt with it. We will also see that, because our human nature does not change, similar problems can easily arise today. We can follow the example of the early church in dealing with these problems. We then look at Stephen's speech and its consequences.

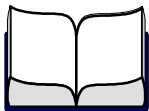
It will help you if you read Acts 6 and 7 before you look at the notes.

## Summary

### The Church in Jerusalem

Welfare overseers appointed	6 v 1 to 7
Stephen accused of blasphemy	6 v 8 to 15
Stephen's address	7 v 1 to 53
Stephen's death	7 v 54 to 60

## Acts 6 v 1 to 7 - Welfare overseers appointed



Read Acts 6 v 1 to 7

*Acts 6 v 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.*

This verse tells us what the problem was:

Help was given to the widows in the early church on a daily basis and the Greek Jews (or Hellenists) complained that their widows were not receiving as much help as the native Jewish widows.

Here were two problems which are also very common in our day:

1. Tension between different ethnic groups
2. Tension caused by perceived injustices

The result is also still common in our day - there was a "complaint" (or "murmuring" in some versions including the Authorised Version).



Have a look at the *Strong's Concordance* definition of "murmuring" on page 15.

You will see that there was "grumbling and grudging". This is all very natural to us all. We all tend to grumble about and bear grudges against people causing us problems.

The cross-references give us food for thought on the subject of "murmuring":

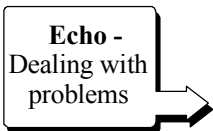


1 Corinthians 10 v 10; James 5 v 9.

- 1 Corinthians 10 v 10 reminds us of the incident in Numbers 14 v 26 to 38 where a whole generation that murmured was destroyed
- James repeated the warning and told those who grumbled that they were liable to be condemned

There is a very useful "echo" in Matthew relating to dealing with problems:

Look at this echo and see how Jesus tells us to cope with problems. Compare your findings with the notes on page 15.



Matthew 18 v 15 to 17.

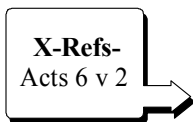
We shall see that this principle laid down by Jesus was applied by the apostles:

*Acts 6 v 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"*

We see that the apostles called together the people who had the problem, and recommended that they should appoint seven men to look at the situation and take charge of the welfare work.

The cross-references show that, earlier in the history of the Jewish nation, Moses also appointed people to sort out problems:



Exodus 18 v 17 to 26; Deuteronomy 1 v 9 to 14.

Verse 2 tells us that the apostles said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables". They were saying that they could not become involved in everything and were maybe gently reminding the believers that telling people about God's message was as important as sorting out welfare problems.

*Acts 6 v 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*

The suggestion was acceptable to all. It is interesting to note that the men chosen all had Greek names. So they made sure that the people looking at the problem were sympathetic to the Greek widows who were being neglected. The problem had been recognised and an amicable solution obtained. This was because there was no hint of national or individual pride, and neither side had made statements or laid down conditions.

*Acts 6 v 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.*

Again we see that prayer played a vital part in the first-century church.

Look at the echoes from “they laid hands” and you will see the significance of this action:

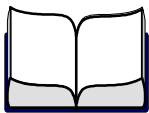
**Echoes -**  
They laid  
hands

Genesis 48 v 14 to 20; Leviticus 8 v 18 and 22; Numbers 27 v 18 to 23; Mark 6 v 5; Acts 8 v 17.

- Jacob laid his hands on Joseph’s sons to bless them
- Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the animals for sacrifice presumably to associate themselves with them
- Moses laid hands on Joshua as a sign that Joshua was to succeed Him
- Jesus laid hands on people to heal them
- The apostles laid hands on believers to bestow the Holy Spirit power

Several of these aspects were applicable in Acts 6 v 6. The apostles were giving their blessing to the work that these men were about to do. They were associating themselves with their work and they were authorising the seven to carry it out.

## Acts 6 v 8 to 15 - Stephen accused of blasphemy



Read Acts 6 v 8 to 15

*Acts 6 v 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.*

We met Stephen, in passing, in the list of men appointed to look after the distribution to widows. Here we see that, in addition to attending to domestic problems, Stephen was also witnessing to the people. Here is another lesson for us: no matter what our natural talents, we should not be afraid to tell others about God’s purpose with mankind.



The reference from “Stephen, full of faith and power” gives an indication of what kind of person he was:

**X-Ref-**  
Full of  
faith and  
power → Acts 6 v 3, 5 and 10.

Stephen:

- Was of good reputation
- Was full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and faith
- Had wisdom and a spirit which his opponents could not resist

Verse 9 tells us of a particular group who were attempting to resist Stephen’s arguments. They seemed to be an influential group, as we shall see.

*Acts 6 v 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*

Here we see that there was no answer to Stephen’s reasoning. The cross-references show that throughout the Bible God’s message went out whatever the opposition:

**X-Refs-**  
Acts 6 v 10 → Exodus 4 v 12; Jeremiah 1 v 18 and 19; Ezekiel 3 v 27;  
Matthew 10 v 19 and 20.

- Moses was assured of God’s guidance when he spoke
- Jeremiah was assured of God’s protection despite all opposition
- Ezekiel was told that he must give the message whether people listened or not
- The apostles were promised God’s help if they were arrested for preaching

Verses 11 and 12 tell us of the actions of the opponents of Stephen, which resulted in him being brought before “the council”. This was the “Sanhedrin”, the highest Jewish court in the land. As we mentioned earlier, Stephen had some influential and powerful opponents.

*Acts 6 v 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."*

The echoes from "false witnesses" give us interesting information:

**Echoes -  
False  
witnesses**

Exodus 20 v 16; Deuteronomy 19 v 16 to 21; Mark 14 v 55 to 59.

- Telling lies was forbidden by the law of Moses
- False witnesses were to be punished with the punishment they had wanted for the accused
- False witnesses had appeared before the same council during the trial of Jesus bringing false witness that he intended to destroy the temple

*Acts 6 v 14 "... we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place ..."*

The echoes from Jesus' comments about the destruction of the temple lead us to the records of what Jesus actually said about the destruction of the temple:

**Echoes -  
destruction  
of the temple**

Matthew 24 v 1 and 2; John 2 v 19 to 21.

- Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple, but he did not claim that he would destroy it
- Jesus referred to his own body as a "temple" and said that the Jews would not succeed in destroying it

At this time the Jews were very proud of their magnificent temple. It was the grand centre of their worship. It had taken over forty years to build so far. Stephen's opponents regarded the law of Moses and the temple with all of its rituals as very important. If they had read their Old Testament carefully they would have seen several echoes telling them that God did not regard the temple as being of such importance:

**Echoes -**  
God's attitude  
to the temple

Isaiah 66 v 1 to 4; Micah 3 v 12.

- Isaiah 66 tells us that the attitude of the worshippers is more important than the building
- Micah 3 tells us that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed

*Acts 6 v 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.*

We do not know what actually happened to Stephen's face , but the cross-references may give us clues:

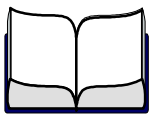
**X-Refs-**  
as the face  
of an angel

Exodus 34 v 29 to 35; Matthew 17 v 2.

It is possible that Stephen's face shone in the same way as the faces of Moses and Jesus.

We shall see how this conflict between God's message and the leaders' ideas progressed, when we consider the next chapter.

## Acts 7 v 1 to 53 - Stephen's address



Read Acts 7 v 1 to 53

This chapter is a very useful summary of parts of the Old Testament. If you wish to relate this chapter to the records in the Old Testament, have a look at the table on Page 13. Rather than following the speech verse by verse, we will look at the two main themes that Stephen expanded.

*Acts 7 v 1 Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"*

The high priest asked Stephen to clarify his position. Was he saying that the temple would be destroyed and the law of Moses superseded?

*Acts 7 v 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"*

Right at the start of his reply, Stephen made a point that occurs over and over again in his speech - that God was not restricted to the temple in Jerusalem, but was concerned with people in other countries as well. This was his first main theme.

The table below details places that Stephen lists in his speech as places where God was active. You will find these places on Map 2 on page 1 of the Additional Notes booklet.

Verse 2	God appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq)
Verse 4	God asked Abraham to move from Haran (northern Syria)
Verse 9	Joseph was sold into Egypt, but God was with him there
Verse 20	Moses was well pleasing to God - in Egypt
Verse 30	An angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in Mount Sinai
Verse 34	God remembered His people in Egypt
Verse 44	The people of Israel had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness
Verse 45	The tabernacle of witness was then in Israel well before the temple was built

If you look at the map, you can see that Stephen had a very strong case. God was in no way restricted to the land of Israel, nor was worship always in the temple.

When Stephen referred to Solomon in his speech, he used the opportunity to really press home the point:

*Acts 7 v 47 "But Solomon built Him a house.*

*48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:*

*49 'Heaven is My throne,*

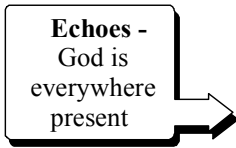
*And earth is My footstool.*

*What house will you build for Me? says the Lord,*

*Or what is the place of My rest?*

*50 Has My hand not made all these things?' "*

The idea that God is not restricted to one place, but is everywhere present, has echoes in other parts of the Bible:



Psalm 139 v 7 to 12; Jeremiah 23 v 23 and 24; Isaiah 41 v 13;  
2 Timothy 4 v 17.

- David was confident that God was in the remotest places caring for him
- God assured Jeremiah that He sees all
- God was always there to help Israel
- Paul was sure that God was with him in his difficulties



We are never out of reach of God and His help.

The other main theme that Stephen expanded in his speech was that of the disobedience of the early Jews. Much of this disobedience was shown to their leader Moses, whom the Jews later claimed to respect (Acts 6 v 14).

The following table gives the references to the disobedience of the early Jews.

Verse 9	Joseph's brothers sold him because of envy
Verse 25 to 29	The Jews rejected Moses' early attempts to help them
Verse 35	This is another reminder that they rejected Moses, the one God had sent to help them
Verse 39 to 41	The Jews did not believe that Moses would come back from Mount Sinai, and made a calf to worship
Verses 42 to 43	They worshipped other gods

The climax of Stephen's speech comes in verse 51:

*Acts 7 v 51 "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.*

*52 "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,*

*53 "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."*

Stephen's audience were just as bad as their forefathers had been in resisting God's commands and rejecting those sent by God. They had gone one step further than previous generations because they had just crucified God's own Son.

It is interesting to look at the scripture from which Stephen quotes in verses 49 and 50:

**X-Ref-**  
Acts 7 v 49

Isaiah 66 v 1 and 2.

If you look at that reference and compare it with Acts 7 v 50, you will see that Stephen stopped part way through verse 2 of Isaiah 66. The Jewish religious leaders would have known how the verse continues. It goes on to say that God looks to those who are humble and respect His Word. Instead of repeating these words, Stephen reprimanded his hearers in the words of Acts 7 v 51, which are the exact opposite of the sentiments in Isaiah 66.

The cross-references from verse 51 give us more insight into Stephen's description of the Jews' problem:

Look at the cross-references and see what you can learn.  
Compare your findings with the notes on page 15.

**X-Refs-**  
Acts 7 v 51

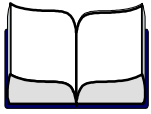
Deuteronomy 31 v 27; 2 Chronicles 30 v 8; Jeremiah 17 v 23;  
Zechariah 7 v 11 and 12.

These verses give a solemn warning of the terrible results of pride - it can stop us hearing the message that God has given to save us.



We should listen carefully to God's message. We must be aware that our pride can prevent us hearing God's message.

## Acts 7 v 54 to 60 - Stephen's death



Read Acts 7 v 54 to 60

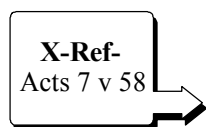
*Acts 7 v 54 When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.*

The leaders were in no mood to listen to Stephen - they wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible. They were showing all the characteristics of their fathers that we have just looked at.

Verses 55 and 56 tell us that Stephen was given the privilege of seeing Christ to encourage him in the last painful moments of his life.

Verses 57 and 58 record the result of the stubbornness of the leaders. They removed Stephen from the city and threw stones at him. As with Jesus earlier, they could not refute the message, but they wished to remove those who caused them embarrassment by teaching it.

Verse 58 also introduces us to "a young man named Saul" who had the witnesses' clothes laid at his feet. If you look at the cross-reference below, you will see what this meant:

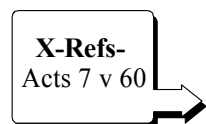


Acts 22 v 20.

Saul was in fact approving the action. We shall learn more of Saul's work in the next session.

*Acts 7 v 60 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.*

We can learn more of Stephen's character by looking at the cross-references:



Matthew 5 v 44; Luke 23 v 34; 1 Thessalonians 4 v 13 and 14.

- Stephen carried out the command of Jesus to pray for his enemies
- Stephen, like Jesus before him, prayed for forgiveness for his murderers
- Stephen died as though he was going to sleep - confident that he would be raised from the dead



We shall be better followers of Jesus if we can copy these attitudes of Stephen.

In the next session we shall see how the first-century church grew despite vicious persecution from people like Saul.



## Old Testament references in Stephen's speech

Acts 7 verse	Event	Old Testament references
2 and 3	Call of Abraham	Genesis 12 v 1 to 3
4	From Ur to Canaan	Genesis 12 v 4 and 5
5	Land promised	Genesis 12 v 7; 13 v 15; 15 v 18
6	400 years as strangers	Genesis 15 v 13 to 16; Exodus 12 v 40 and 41
7	Judgement on oppressor	Exodus 7 v 4 and 5; 14 v 30 and 31
8	Covenant of circumcision given	Genesis 17 v 9 to 14
8	Isaac and Jacob born	Genesis 21 v 1 to 5; 25 v 21 to 26
8	Jacob and his 12 sons	Genesis 35 v 22 to 26
9	Joseph sold into Egypt	Genesis 37 v 4,11,28; 39 v 1 to 3, 21 to 23
10	Joseph raised to power	Genesis 41 v 37 to 44; 42 v 6
11	Seven years' famine	Genesis 41 v 54
12	Jacob's sons went to Egypt to buy corn	Genesis 42 v 1 to 3
13	Joseph made himself known to his brothers	Genesis 45 v 1 to 4 and 16
14	Joseph sent for Jacob	Genesis 45 v 9 to 11
15	Jacob went to Egypt; his death and that of his sons	Genesis 46 v 1 to 7; 49 v 33; Exodus 1 v 6
16	Jacob buried at Hebron	Genesis 50 v 12 to 14
16	Joseph buried at Shechem	Genesis 50 v 24 to 26; Joshua 24 v 32
17 to 19	Israel oppressed in Egypt	Exodus 1 v 7 to 22
20 to 21	Birth of Moses	Exodus 2 v 1 to 10
22 to 28	Moses visited his own people	Exodus 2 v 11 to 14
29	Moses fled to Midian	Exodus 2 v 15 to 22
30 to 35	The burning bush; Moses sent to deliver Israel from Egypt	Exodus 3 v 2 to 10
36	The plagues and exodus	Exodus 7 v 1 to 12 v 51;
36	Red Sea crossing; forty years	Exodus 14 v 16 to 31; Deuteronomy 2 v 7
37	The prophet (Christ) foretold	Deuteronomy 18 v 15
38	The law given	Exodus 19 v 3 to 20
39 to 41	The golden calf	Exodus 32 v 1 to 8
42 and 43	Idolatry of the people	Amos 5 v 25 to 27
44	The tabernacle	Exodus 26 v 30
45	Entry into the land	Joshua 3 v 14
46	David's wish to build a temple	2 Samuel 7 v 1 to 3
47	Solomon built the temple	1 Kings 6 v 1 and 38

## Summary of Session 4

We have seen more of the first-century church and how it worked:

- They tended to grumble, just like we do
- The apostles showed that it is better to talk with those involved in the problem with a view to finding a solution
- The apostles showed that they were concerned about the welfare of the believers



Stephen has shown us more principles to think about:

- God is not restricted to one location
- He can be worshipped anywhere
- We are never out of reach of God's help
- God looks to those who are humble and respect His Word
- We must not resist the message that God has given us
- We should be able to forgive those who persecute us
- We should be able to face death as a sleep from which we shall be raised

## Questions

1. What can we learn from the character of Stephen?
2. What have you learned about dealing with problems involving other people?
3. What have you learned about worship acceptable to God?

## Self-study notes

Dealing with the problems we have with others (page 2):

1. Discuss the problem with the person concerned. Notice the little word “alone”. This means that we don’t talk to other people first. This will usually solve the problem because nobody else knows of it and groups have not formed on each side.
2. If the problem cannot be solved, mention the matter to only one or two others - again do not broadcast the problem - and see if it can be resolved. If independent ideas are brought to bear on the problem, usually a solution can be found.
3. If that fails the whole church should consider the problem.

Lessons from Acts 7 v 51 (page 10):

- Being “stiff-necked” is associated with rebellion or resistance to control by others (Deuteronomy 31 v 27)
- To avoid being “stiff-necked” we should “yield ourselves to the Lord”
- (2 Chronicles 30 v 8)
- The attitude of the Jews meant that they “could not receive instruction” (Jeremiah 17 v 23)
- Zechariah 7 v 11 summarises the Jews’ outlook; they refused to listen and shrugged their shoulders - they were not bothered (Zechariah 7 v 11 and 12)

## Strong’s Concordance definition

### Murmuring

1112 goggusmos (*gong-goos-mos'*)

from 1111;

a *grumbling*;

grudging, murmuring.

## Notes

Learn to  
Read  
Acts  
Effectively

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