

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY
PART EIGHT - CHAPTERS 7 AND 8

Stephen stood trial on false charges which if proven would have brought the death penalty under the Old Testament law. He had opportunity to answer, to defend himself, and save his own skin. Chapter 7 records his answer which in no sense was a defence of his own conduct. It was a defence of the Christian gospel. Stephen behaved like Jesus who was silent to the charges made against Him but did not hesitate to answer attacks on His message.(Matt.27:11,12) Stephen's answer caused his death. The Lord in us would still be silent to personal criticism but unashamed to confess the truth whatever trouble it might get us into.

Stephen's reply was not designed to win an argument but to win his persecutors to Christ by conviction of sin and their need of a saviour. He started on common ground with the Old Testament they said they believed. With each story he made the same point.

God had made a great promise to Abraham of how He would bless him and his descendants,(7:2-5) but again and again they would need a saviour. (7:6,7) The first saviour was Joseph but his brothers rejected him. All the same God used him to bless them.(7:8-16) The next saviour was Moses whom God had first miraculously to raise up from death at the hands of Pharaoh.(7:17-22) His people at first rejected his attempts to save them.(7:23-29) After 40 years in the wilderness God sent him back to Egypt to save his people. He did miracles and then led His people through 'death and resurrection' in the Red Sea to a new life. He promised that God would send someone else who would be like him.(7:30-37) God spoke through him but still the leaders of the people disobeyed and made their own gods.(7:38-43) The Lord then used another saviour, Joshua, to lead His people into enjoying His best.(7:44,45) After further centuries of ups and downs the next saviour, David, became their king and wanted to provide a place for God to live on earth.(7:46) Sadly his son, Solomon, could not see beyond an impressive building, (7:47-50) to God's greater plan to live in people.

Up to this point there was not a word with which the Council could have disagreed although they did not like what they heard because of where it pointed. Now Stephen directly compared all those Old Testament stories to their rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ.(7:51-53) They were deeply convicted and responded with fury.(7:54) Because Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit he saw above their anger and hatred to Christ in glory, (7:55,56) as we can when people are mad with us. The Lord enabled Stephen as he kept his eyes on Him to see, not the rocks they threw at him, but the needy people who threw them, whom the Lord loved and for whom also He died. Following his Lord he committed himself into his Father's hands.(Lk.23:46) Like Jesus on the cross, among Stephen's last words was a prayer for the forgiveness of his murderers.(Lk.23:34) For one at least, Saul of Tarsus, that prayer was granted although Stephen did not live to see it happen.(7:57-60)

Plan C - get them grumbling and so divided had failed. Plan D - all out persecution, was the Devil's last resort.(chapter 8) It was to prove an even bigger failure.

8:1-4 Q.1 Why was Saul so angry? What does his behaviour tell us about the commonest reason people give us a hard time? What effect did plan D have on the spread of the gospel? Why did the apostles remain in Jerusalem?

8:5 Q.2 Which Philip was this?(Acts 1:13; 6:5; 8:14) Why did he go to Samaria?(1:8) Why would it have been hard for him to go?(Jn.4:9) How does his decision to go to Samaria illustrate the importance of his qualifications for dividing up food?(6:3)

8:5-8 Q.3 How did Philip go about being a witness of Christ in Samaria? What can we learn from his example about effective witness? What effect does the gospel have on a community?

8:9-11 Q.4 What were the differences between Philip's ministry and Simon's? How does this help us to recognise false teachers today? Do miracles mean God is behind them?

8:12-17 Q.5 At what point did the Samaritans become Christians, when they believed Philip, when they were baptised or when hands were laid on them and they received the Holy Spirit?(Rom.8:9) Why might God have used these means to bring them to Himself? Does this story mean that we receive the Holy Spirit some time after conversion?

8:18-24 Q.6 What did Simon do wrong? Do we encourage people to think in the same way he did, if we charge for Christian ministry? What do you think his motive was? How did Peter describe his heart? Was he really a Christian?

8:25 Q.7 Why was Peter and John's ministry in Samaria so important? What insight does it give us into how we today might be more effective as a team in Christian work? How did their involvement also widen their own ministry?

8:26,27 Q.8 Why might the angel's command to Philip have seemed ridiculous? What was the long term consequence of his obedience? What does this story teach us about the necessity of getting our instructions about Christian work from God? Why do we usually not do it?

8:28-35 Q.9 What does this story teach us about how perfectly God plans our meetings with people? What can we learn about how to get into a worthwhile conversation with a stranger? How does Philip demonstrate the most effective use of the Bible with those who do not know Christ?

8:36-40 Q.10 What does this section show us about how to lead a person to Christ? What was the value of water baptism on this occasion? Why did God remove Philip so quickly? How could the Ethiopian have survived as a Christian without follow-up?