

Acts 6 - John Karmelich

1. Chapter 6 can be subtitled: "You never know what God has planned for you".
 - a) It serves as a background to some of the main characters for the next 3 chapters.
 - b) Yet, the main point of Chapter 6 is "there was some grumbling about people not being fair in giving to the poor, and 7 people were picked to oversee it."
 - i) Yet the amazing thing is that at least 2 of these 7, are recorded in the Bible as doing tremendous deeds *that have nothing to do with the job mentioned here!*
 - a) OK, so why bother with Chapter 6?
 - b) Why can't the Bible just say, here was this guy Stephen, and go on to his great sermon of Chapter 7?
 - c) Why can't the Bible just say, here is Phillip, and God called him to a mighty deed in Chapter 8?
 - ii) One of the big-picture ideas to get across is:
 - a) God will often test your faith in the small ministries before going on to give you a bigger ministry.
 - b) "Bigger" does not necessarily mean bigger audience, it is simply a bigger role in the destiny of the church from God or our perspective.
 - c) Chapter 6 is a bridge chapter.
 - i) It tells some background of the early growing church.
 - ii) It gives a few interesting details that are good examples to use.
 - a) Some of the problems faced in Chapter 6 are common throughout church history. This includes bigotry against individuals, groups.
 - b) It also teaches about the danger of over-commitment.
 - (1) God didn't call us to do *all* jobs, just *specific* jobs. The "body of Christ" works as a unit, and each must do their share, but not everything.
 - (2) Many a pastor & church member has "burned out" from over-commitment.
 - d) Chapter 6 is also a time bomb.
 - i) The Church was growing.
 - a) That growth bothered the "status quo religious community."
 - ii) The growth led to the first recorded persecution in church history.
 - a) I have found that any successful movement, be it Christian or whatever, has its critics and detractors. It often stems in jealousy.
 - e) Chapter 6 also gives some of the best lessons in church growth.
 - i) Churches get obsessed with marketing programs, advertisements, books and manuals on growth.
 - ii) The Book of Acts, teaches, by example a much better model for church growth. It keys on the *leaders* being focused on prayer and studying the Word of God as their main priority. Many a church has fallen because the congregation expects their pastors to do a little of everything.
 - iii) If you look at the largest churches in the United States, the leaders focus on taking the Bible *seriously* and on prayer. The "growth" naturally follows.
 - iv) So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
 - a) (Isa. 55:11 NIV)

2. Let's get started. Chapter 6, Verse 1: In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.
 - a) Here is the second recorded incident of problems in the early church.
 - i) The first was in the last chapter, when Ananias & Sapphira lied to the church about how much money they were donating.
 - b) Many people then, as well as now, had no means of financial support, and were dependant upon the church for survival. This is a practice carried on from Judaism.
 - c) Here we deal with bigotry.
 - i) The Grecian Jews were Jews that adapted to the Greek culture that existed in most of the surrounding world. It does not mean Jews-from-Greece. Remember that a few centuries earlier, Alexander the Great conquered the world, and thus, the Greek-culture was dominant in that area of the world.
 - ii) The Hebraic Jews were those who were born and raised in Israel.
 - iii) The verse implies that this was an accusation, and not necessarily a fact.
 - iv) Unfortunately, bigotry has been part of the church culture throughout its history. It can be against individuals because of their looks, where they are from, or where they are dressed. Some of the saddest parts of American history has been the bigotry within the church.
 - a) I remember some time ago, the Southern Baptist Church made a public declaration asking for forgiveness for their history of separation of white and black churches. To make amends, many Southern Baptist churches now "partner" one in an affluent area with one in a less affluent area financially.
3. Verse 2: So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."
 - a) "The Twelve" were the 12 apostles, (including Matthias (Chapter 1)).
 - b) Gathering everybody together was no easy feat. Remember the church at this point was up to about 5,000 people.
 - c) "Waiting on Tables" does not mean be a waiter. Although it may include this, it is more of a manager or an accountant-type role as an overseer.
 - d) It is important to understand the attitude of the Apostles. It was not, "Gee, we're way too important to deal with the food distribution problem, you people deal with it, and it's beneath us!"
 - i) No! This was about delegation. No believer is any more or less important than any other believer. From Billy Graham down to the church janitor
 - ii) "...those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor." (1 Cor 12:22-23a)
 - iii) Notice also the delegation of responsibility.
 - a) The Apostles themselves did not choose the "seven".
 - b) They left it up to the church (probably those who brought up the issue) to figure out who to be the leaders.

- e) Notice the job responsibilities for the Apostles, as laid out in Verse 4: They are to be "full of the Spirit and wisdom".
 - i) How does one get "full of the Spirit and wisdom?"
 - a) It doesn't mean to walk around more holier than others.
 - b) "Full of the Spirit" is the daily *mindset* of setting your priorities and focus on God, rather than yourself.
 - (1) It comes from a *daily and continuous* attitude of prayer, and regular study of the Word of God.
 - c) The best analogy I can think of is: It is like getting in good physical shape. One does not have to exercise every moment, but one does have to exercise every day to be in top shape.
 - d) One of my favorite prayers in the Bible is Colossians 1:9-12
 - e) Paul said: "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." (Col 1:9 NIV)
 - (1) If you want to know the *benefit* of that prayer, read verses 10-12!
 - (2) Colossians, Chapter 1, Verses 9-12 makes a great daily devotional! Read it every day for a week and think about the implications of these verses!
 - f) Why didn't the Apostles themselves get involved in this ministry? As I said in the opening page, *their* full time job is "prayer and the ministry of the word."
 - i) This should be a full time job for a pastor. Not the regular meetings, not visiting the sick, not setting up social programs, but prayer and studying of the word.
 - a) It is understandable for a very small church can't have this luxury. But as a church grows, the pastors need to have the discipline to say no to other functions.
 - b) At the same time, church members need to look to each other and God as their final authority to solve every little problem, not the pastor.
 - c) (OK, off my soapbox ☺).
 - g) Last thing about these verses. Why seven?
 - i) The answer is not stated, so we don't know. The best *possible* answer I read is to have one leader for each day of the week, that way it does not require too much voluntary time of any one individual.
- 4. Verse 5: This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.
 - a) Stephen is singled out here. Probably because he became the first martyr for the church, as described in the next chapter.
 - i) He may have even stood out among the candidates as Choice #1.
 - b) All 7 people had Greek names. Remember that the problem is that the Greek-cultured Jews were complaining they did not get equal treatment by the Israel-born-cultured Jews. It is possible (but not definite) that all 7 were from the Greek culture, as to satisfy the demand.
 - c) The only other person famous in this group is Phillip, who is discussed in Chapter 8.
 - i) The histories of the other five are not discussed further in the Bible.

- d) Notice that the "7" were presented to the Apostles, "who laid hands on them".
 - i) I don't take the view that "laying of hands" passes on some sort of special powers through the fingertips. The "laying of hands" from a Jewish perspective is a form of *identification*. When animals were sacrificed at the altar for sins, the donor of the animal would lay hands on the animal to symbolize the *identification* of the animal with the sin. The animal was killed as a symbol of repentance for that sin (a.k.a. "killing" the sin.)
 - ii) Therefore, "laying of the hands" in this case was a form of identification for acceptance of their ministry by the church.
 - iii) Notice that the apostles *prayed* and laid hands on them. They prayed that God would bless their ministry. The laying of hands symbolized their equality in the site of God as to be set out for their ministry.
- 5. Verse 7: So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.
 - a) This is an interesting verse to be placed here.
 - b) The question is what does the growth of the church have to do with this whole story so far in the chapter?
 - i) The answer is:
 - a) The Apostles, stuck to what God called them to do, pray, study the Word of God and *preach* the Word of God.
 - b) Problems within the church (the accusations) were dealt with swiftly, prayerfully and wisely.
 - c) The growth of the church lead to delegation of responsibilities. *All* Christians are given some sort of spiritual gift (See 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12). God expects us to *use* the gifts He gives us for the benefit of the Church!
 - c) Luke also adds this interesting little comment about "a large number of priests became obedient to the faith".
 - i) An overly brief summary of how the nation of Israel got started. First there was Abraham. His son was Isaac, and his son was Jacob. Jacob had 12 sons. The families & descendants of the 12 sons *are* the Israeli nation. One of the 12 tribes (the sons of Levi) were called to be priests. If you were a descendant of Levi, you were required to go to seminary and be a priest.
 - a) You had to have Levi genes! ☺
 - ii) The High Priest was something different. They were the direct decedents of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Aaron was of the tribe of Levi.
 - iii) So why did some of the priests convert?
 - a) I'm convinced the combination of evidence got to them. The priests worked in the Temple. Remember that after Jesus died, the veil of the Temple was torn top to bottom. This was a 12+inch thick veil, so this was a miracle. The combination of seeing that evidence *plus* the preaching of the apostles got to some of the priests.
 - b) So why didn't *all* the priests convert to Christianity? Remember that no matter *how* much evidence one sees, it is still a matter of the heart. Some people have too much of an ego to want to change their lifestyle to accept Christianity.
 - (1) As Jesus put it: ""He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:31 NIV)

6. Now that the "7" are established, we read a little more about Stephen: Verse 8: Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.
- a) Remember that the purpose of the "7" was to watch over the daily distribution of food. Here was Stephen performing signs and miracles, and successfully debating against the religious Jews.
 - i) It shows that "signs and miracles" were not limited to just the 12 apostles.
 - b) As the church grew, so did the jealousy of the status quo. As one becomes successful in *any* occupation, or as a church grows, one can expect opposition from the least likely of places. I have heard the testimony of pastors stating that some of the biggest opponents to their church growth have been from jealousy from other church leaders.
 - c) I suspect Luke could not resist the joke of mentioning that the Synagogue that *lead* the rebellion against the early church was called the "Synagogue of the Freedman". His point is "you can call the church anything you want, but it is Jesus Christ that sets you free, not your trust in the name of your synagogue. That is a good lesson for us!
 - d) Luke further mentions that the scope of the rebellion was also from other provinces.
 - i) This shows that the *power* of the church was a growing threat to the "status quo". Christianity was not just growing in Jerusalem, but in the surrounding provinces.
 - ii) One of the provinces mentioned (Cilicia) is where Paul is from. As we will discover in a few chapters, that Paul was part of the opposition force before he was converted. I suspect Luke included that to tie in that point.
 - e) I like the comment in verse 10: "but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke."
 - i) Does this mean that Stephen was smarter than the Rabbis? Better educated? Winning religious debates does not come from better debates skills.
 - ii) Stephen won the debates because he spoke the truth.
 - a) Jesus said "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."
(1) (John 17:17 NIV)
 - iii) Earlier, I stated that Stephen was full of spiritual wisdom and understanding. One does not get that way unless one is a regular student of the Word of God.
 - a) God will teach you the right words to say at the right time (John 14:26), but it is still up to us to *learn* those words so God can *give* them to us at the right time. I believe that is what we are seeing here with Stephen.
 - (1) Paul said "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 NIV)
7. When your enemy can't beat you with the truth, they next try other tactics: Verse 11: Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."
- a) Chapter 7 is a speech by Stephen that answers this accusation. It is interesting to read Chapter 7 with this verse in mind. Stephen spends a lot of time going over Jewish history. Not to teach the roomful of people what they already knew, but to validate that Stephen himself does honor Moses and more importantly God, and that these accusations are false.

8. The enemy strikes back (cont.). Verse 12: So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."
- a) Never underestimate how low an enemy will sink to accomplish their ends. You have to understand the *threat* Christianity was to the Sanhedrin. Their whole base of income, power and control comes from obedience of the Jewish people to *their* interpretation of the law. (Not to mention that the Jewish historian Josephus mentions how corrupt the High Priest was at this time period!)
 - b) One of the great "promises" to Christians is that we will all suffer with Christ.
 - i) "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, (Philippians 1:29 NIV)
 - ii) Why is that?
 - a) Part of it is jealousy. Pride creeps into all sorts of people, even those who are devoutly committed to Christ. They want God to work through *them* and not other people.
 - b) It is also spiritual. One of Satan's goals is to limit church growth. The more he can cause division within the church and persecution from outside the church, the more (he thinks) he can stop the growth.
 - c) Again, keep these accusations in mind as you read chapter 7. They are the focus of the speech.
9. Verse 15: All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.
- a) How did Luke know what Stephen's face looked like?
 - i) In the room was Paul (Acts 22:20). Luke was a traveling companion of Paul.
 - b) "Men, when you teach on heaven, let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a grin on your lips. When you teach on hell, your normal face will do fine". Charles Spurgeon.
10. I'm going to cut it short this week (a first I believe!) Next week is a long chapter and I'll make up for it then. ☺
- a) Let's Pray. Father, we thank you for the lessons of the early church and for that of Stephen. We ask that like Stephen, we be filled with *all* spiritual wisdom and understanding, that we be of service to you Father. Help us to know the *specific* ministry you have planned for each of us, and to fulfill your desires for our life. Also, help us to stand on your truth, for against that truth, no one can make a defense. We ask protection against your enemies and wisdom and discernment in our actions. For we ask this in Jesus name, Amen.