

Acts 6 - John Karmelich

As I read this chapter a couple of times, I kept wondering, why did the author include these stories? It would help to remember Luke wasn't there. This short chapter revolves around two key events. Many widows were part of the early church. (There were about 20,000 members then all near Jerusalem). It's always been standard practice for Jewish people to care for the less fortunate. That idea would apply to the church as well, as no one else could take care of them. Since the apostles focused on preaching to a large group, they decided to appoint seven people to take care of the less fortunate. One of those seven became a powerful witness for Jesus and he debated with Jewish religious leaders. He got arrested and his trial is the main topic of Chapter 7. I pondered why this part of the bible? Remember Luke was not there! Paul (unsaved at this point) was a dominant player of the religious leaders accusing Stephen and he'll be on trial in Chapter 7 for preaching Jesus! That's why Stephen's story is told here. It leads to the first great persecution of the church. In short Stephen's story leads to a natural flow of what occurred as the church started to grow. Therefore this is a good spot to include this story of "helping widows in the church who had no family support".

All of that leads to my favorite question: So what? Why does God want us to know all of this? Why's this part of the bible? It's because in life we must deal with problems. Sometimes we deal with internal issues (within our family, our communities) and sometimes they're external (threats to our nation). We could be dealing with a sick relative or the government's desire for a larger control of our lives. As I go through the two stories of this chapter, what they got in common is one deals with an internal issue and the other is dealing with an external threat. It gives us some insight into how God wants us to deal with issues that arise "within and without"!

With that said, let me describe the two stories in a little more detail. Keep in mind the church is now a large group that was almost all from Jewish backgrounds. To be kicked out of a Jewish synagogue did mean ex-communication by one's family, and usually meant limited ability to earn a living. Therefore, the church had to look to each other for financial survival. That led to the issue of distribution of funds to those in need. They had widows from Israel and from other places (who were still Jewish). Word got to the disciples that the widows from outside of Israel were being shunned. So the disciples said we got to appoint people to be in charge of this issue. Seven men were chosen! All seven had Greek names. It just meant they came from a culture similar to the widows with similar backgrounds dealing with this!

With that issue "solved for the moment", the text focuses on an external problem. Remember all these Jewish Christians were meeting in the temple courtyard! Obviously the Jewish leadership wasn't crazy about this growing Christian movement on their doorstep! At the same time great miracles were done through one of those seven (Stephen) helping the less fortunate. This man had the gift to preach Jesus! Remember the New Testament wasn't written yet. So Stephen preached Jesus as the Promised Messiah strictly using Old Testament scripture.

Keep in mind another reason why Luke wanted to include this story is it's the background to how Paul had his first encounter with the church. When Stephen was arrested for preaching the Gospel, it led to a trial in front of a court with 70 judges! (71 if you count the high priest). It appears that Paul (called Saul at that time) was part of that group. We'll read of him in the next chapter that ties well this one.

The short version is Stephen's arrest leads to a long speech that is Chapter 7. Paul was among those at that trial. It ended with Stephen being stoned to death for preaching Jesus! One of the things I ponder is why does God allow Christian martyrs? If God's God, He could destroy those throwing the stones

in one big swoosh. One of my favorite Old Testament stories is God destroying an army surrounding Jerusalem as one angel did all that damage after dinner! I'm just saying, if God is God, He could have prevented all of this! However God had his reasons as I'll discuss next:

One of the things history has taught us, is the church has seen its greatest growth when persecuted. I'd say that's a key reason why God allowed this to occur. That led to Christians being scattered which did lead to further growth of the church. The specifics of Stephen's speech and the aftermath is the topic of the next chapter. For right now, the issue is how the church handled internal and external problems. If you ever go to the old city of Jerusalem, one of the gates is known as Stephen's gate in memory of him!

Obviously God doesn't call most Christians to be martyrs! He determines how long each of us will live. Our job is to be a witness for Him all throughout our lives using our God given gifts, as well as a little boldness to stand up for Him at the appropriate times. For Stephen, preaching the gospel led to the big opportunity to preach to the top religious leaders in Israel and he did a great job of it. I'd bet Christians were inspired by that speech. How did Luke get that speech? Most likely there was a record keeper of any official hearing and I suspect Luke got a copy of the transcripts! In fact Paul may have even kept it as he worked right after that persecuting Christians prior to his conversion. If Paul had it, Luke got it!

Meanwhile back to Chapter 6. The important thing is the early church showed its boldness to continue to be a witness for Jesus even when facing persecution. Give them credit for that. Remember Peter and John were released from prison when they faced their trials in the last few chapters. Now the leaders of the Jewish religion were saying in effect, "No more Mr. Nice Guy!" and killed Stephen for preaching!

What all of this reminds us is the life we live as Christians is to remember the next life is what we're to focus on more than this one. Our purpose for living is to use our lives to make a difference for Jesus. It means dealing with internal and external issues in effect at the same time. That's why Luke included all of this in a fairly short chapter. With that said, let's begin on the details.

With that said, on the same page where you downloaded this summary is a detailed lesson on Chapter 6 on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. You're always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John