Lesson 29
Acts 6–9

Acts 6

Verses 1–7: Who were the Grecians (verse 1)? We would probably call them “Hellenists.” Remember that as yet the gospel has not been preached to the Gentiles, so who might these people have been? Is there anything comparable to this division in today’s Church?

Why were the Grecians complaining?

The word disciples (verses 1–2) translates a Greek word that means “learners” or “students.” Why would Luke use that name to describe the members of the Church?

In verse 2 the phrase “serve tables” is a misleading translation of a Greek idiom meaning “keep accounts.” (Just as one of our words for bench, bank, can mean either “bench” or “financial institution,” the Greeks used table to mean both the tables at which they ate and the tables at which they conducted monetary transactions.) The second translation probably fits the context better. What are the Twelve saying is the problem?

What does Peter mean by “leave the word of God” (verse 2)? How does Peter propose to solve the problem that confronts him?
Why is it important for Luke that “a great company of the priests [i.e., of the Zadokites—Sadducees—the party that controlled the temple] were obedient to the faith”?

**Verses 8–15:** Stephen’s calling is to see to it that the welfare funds are distributed equitably among the members of the Church. However, from here on we see nothing of him carrying out that job. We see only his preaching. Why?

Is there any connection between the story of solving the welfare problem and Stephen’s martyrdom other than the fact that Stephen was involved in each?

The description of Stephen in verse 8 is parallel to his description in verse 5. What do you make of that parallel? Why does Luke focus on these aspects of Stephen’s character?

In verse 9 we see that several different groups of Jews met in the synagogue. “The Libertines” seems to refer to the descendants of Jews who had been taken as slaves to Rome in 63 BC. The descendants were later given their liberty and returned to Jerusalem. What do you think these groups are disputing with Stephen?

What does verse 10 tell us? In what sense can the members of the synagogue not resist Stephen’s wisdom and spirit?

How are “wisdom and spirit” connected with the earlier descriptions of Stephen as “a man full of faith and the Holy Ghost” (verse 5) and as a man “full of faith and power”? What is the connection between wisdom and faith? What is the connection between having the Holy Ghost and having power? What kind of power?
What are the charges against Stephen (verses 11–14)? Is there a parallel between Stephen’s experience and Christ’s? If so, what does that parallel teach us?

Acts 7

Verses 1–53: How does Stephen’s sermon (verses 2–53) answer the high priest’s question (verse 1) and the charges made against him (Acts 6:11–14)? If it doesn’t, why not?

When Jesus taught the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), he did so by teaching them from the history of Israel recorded in scripture. When he next taught the disciples (Luke 24), he did the same thing. When Peter preached (Acts 2–3), he did the same thing. Now Stephen does it. Are they doing the same thing that Ammon did when he preached to King Lamoni: “he began at the creation of the world, and also the creation of Adam, and told him all the things concerning the fall of man, and rehearsed and laid before him the records and the holy scriptures of the people, which had been spoken by the prophets” (Alma 18:36)? Why is this the pattern of preaching for the first Christians? What does this pattern have to do with the audience to whom they are preaching? Does it have anything to do with Peter’s assumption that those to whom he is preaching do what they do out of ignorance (Acts 3:17)? What does that ancient pattern suggest about our preaching today?

In verse 51 Stephen tells them that they resist the Holy Ghost just as their fathers did. Does the history of Israel that he has recounted show that they have resisted? How?
Which of the prophets did Israel persecute (verse 52)? (See, for example, 2 Chronicles 36:14–16 and 1 Kings 19:14.)
Which did it slay (verse 52)? (See, for example, Jeremiah 26:23 and 2 Chronicles 24:20–21.)

In verse 53 Stephen accuses them of having received the Law but not having kept it. In what sense have they not kept it? Remember that Stephen is speaking not only to Sadducees, for whom the Law means keeping the temple ordinances and the associated purity laws, but also to the Pharisees, for whom the Law means the temple ordinances and purity laws plus their interpretations of those purity laws for everyday life. Both groups have been zealous in keeping the Law as they understand it. Do we have comparable groups in the Church today, those who understand differently what our law means? How might we who are also zealous in keeping the law we have received be like these people to whom Stephen speaks? Is there a sense in which we, too, might receive the law but not keep it, in spite of our zeal for the law?

**Verses 54–60:** Though the King James Version of verse 54 makes it appear that members of the council starting chewing on Stephen, it probably really means that they gritted their teeth and showed their anger to him by doing so: “they gritted their teeth at him” might be a more literal translation.

What is the significance of Stephen’s vision (verses 55–56)? What does it mean to see “the glory of God”? Is that the same as seeing the Father himself?

Why does the council react to Stephen’s vision as they do (verses 57–58)? In verse 57, why do the members of the
council shout out loudly and cover their ears in response to the vision?

It appears that the stoning of Stephen was not done in accordance with Jewish law. If that is true, what does it tell us about this event?

“They stoned Stephen” could better be translated “they kept on stoning Stephen.” What do we learn from that?

Who was calling out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (verse 59)? Compare verse 59 to Luke 23:46. What does that comparison suggest?

Acts 8

Verses 1–3: Why does this section begin and end with comments about Saul? How do verses 1 and 3 differ in their depiction of Saul? Why do the apostles remain in Jerusalem even though the other members of the Church flee to the countryside to avoid persecution?

Verses 4–25: What is the consequence of persecution as seen in verse 4? Is the Philip mentioned here (verse 5) one of the apostles, or is he one of the seven men chosen to deal with the welfare problem (Acts 6:5)? How do you know which he is?

What would traditional Jews have thought of Philip preaching to the Samaritans?

Why does Simon join himself to Philip (verses 9–13)? What effect do you think that would have had on Philip’s preaching?

Why do Peter and John go to Samaria to see that the people there receive the gift of the Holy Ghost? Why didn’t Philip give them that gift (verses 14–17)?
Did Peter and John know of Philip’s preaching beforehand? What was not right about Simon’s heart (verse 21)?

In Deuteronomy 29:17 we also see the phrase “gall of bitterness” (verse 23), which has to do with idolatry. Does it have that or a related meaning here?

Had Simon’s conversion been genuine? (See verse 13.) What does Simon’s response (verse 24) show us?

Verses 26–40: The word translated eunuch may not mean a person who has been emasculated but, instead, a government official. Indeed, that was the most common use of the term in ancient literature. Since eunuchs in the former sense were not allowed to convert to Judaism (Deuteronomy 23:1, but see Isaiah 56:3–8 for the Lord’s promise to them), it is likely that the latter is the intended sense, especially given the way verse 27 describes him. What would traditional Jews have thought of this man’s conversion? (Remember that at this time the Christians were still considered part of Judaism, both by themselves and by the Jews.)

What does Luke intend to show by telling this story and the story of Philip’s preaching in Samaria, one right after the other?

If the eunuch has gone to worship in Jerusalem (verse 27), what do we know about him? Note that he was almost certainly reading out loud (verse 28). It appears to have been rare in the ancient world for a person to be able to read silently.

What problem is the eunuch having with Isaiah 53:7–8 (“Esaias”; see Acts 8:30–31)?
Note that though the meaning of verse 37 is consonant with the story in which it appears, that verse was probably not part of the original manuscript. It seems to be a later addition. Why might someone have later added that verse?

Why do you think that the Spirit carried Philip off after he baptized the eunuch (verse 39)?

Acts 9

**Verses 1–2:** It is probably helpful to know that the Roman government had given the council of Jerusalem (the Sanhedrin) authority over Jews living in cities outside the boundaries of Judea. Why do you think Paul would have chosen Damascus as a place to root out Christianity?

**Verses 3–9:** How is Saul persecuting Christ (verse 4)?

Jesus uses a Greek proverb: It is difficult to kick against the goads (verse 5). What is the point of that proverb? What happens to an ox that kicks when it is goaded by its master?

Is Christ warning Saul? If so, of what?

Why doesn’t the Lord tell Saul what he wants him to do (verse 6)? Why does he send him to Damascus to find out? Why do you think that Saul was struck blind?

**Verses 10–22:** A saint is someone dedicated or consecrated to God (verse 13). What does it mean to be consecrated to a god? What does it mean to say that we are consecrated to our Christ?

How are verses 15 and 16 parallel? Why and in what sense or senses must those who bear Christ’s name to unbelievers suffer for his sake?
Given what we have seen before about the early Christian method of preaching, how do you suppose that Saul went about proving that Jesus was the Messiah (verse 22)?

**Verses 23–31:** Why do the Jews want to kill Saul?

How does the Jerusalem Church’s response compare to that of those in Damascus (compare verse 26 to verses 19–22)?

Why does Barnabas take Saul to see the apostles (verse 27)?

Why might Saul have particularly preached to the Grecians in Jerusalem (verse 29)? Are these the same Grecians referred to in Acts 6:1?

Why would the Grecians want to kill Saul (verse 29)?

What does it mean to say “then had the churches rest” (verse 31)?

**Verses 32–43:** Why is it important for Luke to tell this story? Presumably there were other miracles stories that he does not tell. Why tell this one?

**Note on the names Saul and Paul**

Though it is common to say that the name is Saul before his conversion and Paul afterward, that appears not to be the case. For one thing, the book of Acts refers to him as Saul after his conversion (Acts 13:1). For another, the scriptures give us no reason for the two names.

Roman citizens generally had three names, a personal name, a clan name, and a family name. Many people also had a nickname. Paulus (Paul in English) was a common Roman family name and never occurs as a personal name.
in any documents outside the New Testament, so it is unlikely that it is a personal name there either. However, Saul was a common personal name among Jews. So the name Saul appears to have been his personal name while the name Paul was probably his family name as it was for his first convert, Sergius Paulus, though there is no evidence that they were related. (The name Paul occurs frequently in Roman documents as a family name, but it never occurs as a personal name.) Of course, a person then, just as now, could be known by his family name. It is not uncommon for someone to refer to me as Faulconer, for example, rather than by my given name. We don’t know what Paul’s clan name might have been.