

WHAT GOOD CAN COME OUT OF TROUBLE?

Acts 6–7

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Our Scripture tonight is once more taken from the Book of Acts. We're going to be in Acts 6 and 7 this evening. We have been in the first section of six sections in the Book of Acts. We've already looked—in the months of October, November and December—at Acts 1–5, which can be wrapped up in the outline of “Birth of the Church, the Church in Jerusalem.”

I've just come from Jerusalem. Just a week ago today was our last day on tour. As I was sitting here worshipping this evening, I felt kind of stabbed by the Holy Spirit. I've led five tours now to the Holy Land and I've never taken a group to worship with any church in Jerusalem. In the Book of Acts, when people went to Jerusalem, they didn't go to see where the Lord preached or prayed, or the Upper Room. When the people in the Book of Acts went to Jerusalem, they went to link up with the living church, to bring it aid or to bring it comfort or encouragement or strengthening. Today, when Christians go to Jerusalem, by and large we go simply to see the sights. One of the reasons is the church in Jerusalem today is very small. It's made up of expatriots of non-Jews—Gentiles who are living in Israel and worshipping at the Assemblies of God center, the YMCA. Or if there's a Christian presence at all, it's more in the Arab community. Bethlehem has a strong Greek Orthodox Christian community. Nazareth has a strong Baptist community. East Jerusalem has a good-sized Baptist community. But in terms of the Jewishness of the church, that's been pretty much lost in Israel today. The largest church that is ministering to the Jewish community is the Baptist church, which is charismatic and is comprised of Jewish people, Arab people, and expatriates—Gentiles living in the land.

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When we pray for Jerusalem, we need to pray for those churches. We need to ask that the Lord would open up the eyes of His people, His ancient people, once again.

I have some of the greatest tour guides a person can have. I continually get comments from people who have been on our tours of the ministry that the guides have. One of the things that happens in the first two or three days on tour is the people on tour will come to me and say, “Is our guide a Christian?” and I’ll have to say, “No, our guide is Jewish.” “She or he knows the New Testament so well. Aren’t they close to the kingdom?” In my first years of leading tours, I felt that way and I loved the guides. They’re personal friends of mine. I felt in my first days of being there, the first years of touring, “They’re so close because they know the Scriptures so well.” But as I’ve gotten to know them more on a personal level, I realize the wonderful, engaging, delightful people that they are, but their thorough knowledge of the New Testament has, in some ways, inoculated them from the gospel. Because being able to quote it and know it so well and yet not believe it has produced a greater hardening in the heart. I would suggest that that is one of the things that happen when we get around God’s Word. If we’re not responding to it in obedience and in faith, our continued use of it can be a dangerous thing in our life, because it can create a more hardened resistance to the gospel. We need to continually pray that there would come an opening into the hearts and lives of those who live in that land from which the Bible came and in whom the Lord ministered.

The Early Church in Jerusalem, as we have seen in Acts 1–5, was a very dynamic, thriving, growing church. In one day, three thousand people were added to the church—in Acts 2—and they were baptized. How they were baptized was resolved by me this year in Jerusalem. I finally understood how that many people could be immersed in one day. That’s always been kind of a problem for me. Where would you get that much water in one day to baptize three thousand

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people, just in the spur of the moment? There have been archeological excavations going on at the south end of the Temple Mount, north of the old City of David. Approaching the temple area, they have unearthed fifty large Jewish baptismals which were used for ritual cleansing purposes for any worshipper going up to the temple. That would have been the place at Jerusalem where there would have been a sufficient supply of water in a natural setting for baptism. They were converted in the temple courts, they walked down to these “baptismals” and were baptized in the name of Christ. So when the New Testament says that in one day three thousand people were converted and baptized, it wasn’t telling us a story or presenting to us some historical or geographical problem. It was just saying that this is what happened and this is where it could have occurred.

Christian baptism is not something that goes on perpetually, but it’s a once and for all event—to be baptized into Christ.

Added to that three thousand, the church grew to another fifty thousand men. Now we come to Acts 6. The church in Jerusalem has made tremendous expansion. On two occasions already, in Acts 1–5, there have been imprisonments. Peter and John are imprisoned first and released. Then the whole apostolic company of twelve is imprisoned and told not to preach any more. Yet they go out into the temple and preach the words of life. It seems like nothing can be going better. And, by the way, the church can expand and grow in times of peace. We sometimes make the mistaken assumption that the church can only grow when it’s being persecuted. Not so. The church can grow in times of great stability and peace. In fact, Paul, in writing to Timothy, will say in 1 Timothy 2 that we’re to pray for political stability and peace that we may live quiet and peaceful lives. The church grows well in a time of peace.

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Now there's going to be a time of persecution. Chapters 6–8 is a whole second section in the Book of Acts in which we address the theme "Persecution Leads to Expansion." This whole section begins with a statement of a church problem.

I've articulated before, as we've looked at the last section, that the devil really has three ways that he will continually try to defeat the work of God. It is revealed in these early chapters of the Book of Acts.

The first thing he will try to do is defeat the leadership, in some way discourage or pick off or destroy the effectiveness of leadership in the body.

The second thing he will do, if the first thing fails, is he will attempt to divide the body so that it becomes locked into quarrels among itself and its attention, therefore, gets diverted from its larger mission in the world. That is going to happen in Acts 6.

If that fails, then the third thing that the enemy will try is to persecute the church. Or the flip-side of persecution is seduction. If you are holding a prisoner and you want to bleed information out of that prisoner, you could either try to beat it out of him or sugar-coat it out of him, by promising the prisoner something. In the west, in America, or in Western Europe, the way the church is defeated is by seduction. In Eastern Europe, in communist countries today, in Muslim countries, the way the church is dealt with is through persecution. Both persecution and seduction can be very effective.

But here in Acts 6, the second strategy of the enemy is underway and that is to divide the Body.

So we begin Acts 6 "When the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebrew Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1, NIV).

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Several things that we ought to note about that verse. One is the honesty of Luke to tell us that there were problems in the Early Church. The great thing I appreciate about the Bible is that it doesn't try to do revisionists history. It doesn't try to present to us the aura of a perfect church, a church without fault. Sometimes we read the New Testament with rosy colored tints on our glasses and we say, "If we could only be the Early Church all over again!" As if to say that, if we were that church, there would be no problems. But that is a misreading of the New Testament. The Early Church had its difficulties. It had its relational problems. It had its doctrinal problems. It had its ministerial failures. Here it is a sharp relational problem. Had the writers of the New Testament glossed over this and only showed to us the positive dynamics of the church—the way that God was pouring out His Spirit upon His people and how people were being converted and healed and signs and wonders were being done—if that were all we were told, then we may have a very difficult time, in the contemporary sense, of identifying who we are and what God is doing in our midst. But the writer of Acts, as he writes, is compelled by the Holy Spirit, and considers it sufficiently important to note the real story of the church and the real story is that people in the body of Christ do get into conflicts and there's no covering that up.

That, by the way, made it a lot easier for me as pastor to recognize that whenever a group of people—even in a church our size—get together, there are going to be disagreements on things. There's no sense in pretending and acting as though the body of Christ is all a toothpaste Gleam kind of a smile. That everything is always alright. People get bent out of shape with other people in the body, don't they? They disagree sometimes over strategy. They disagree about teaching. They disagree about music. They disagree about what a spiritual church is.

I had a couple, who were visitors, say to me after a service recently, "We perceive that this is not a very spiritual church." Their perception of spirituality carried certain kinds of tones of voice

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and things they were looking for. I wanted to say, “If you’d only take a moment to look at the fruit of the Spirit that’s present in people’s lives. Don’t judge things by an artificial kind of thing.” We have different ways of judging what’s spiritual.

The Early Church had their problem and their problem occurred as the result of a cultural division. The church at this point, in Acts 6, had not broadened out beyond a Jewish base. It did not yet incorporate Gentiles, but it did incorporate what is called “Hellenistic Jews” and “Hebrew Jews.” The Hellenistic Jews were Jews that had come back to Jerusalem after living in foreign countries. They had picked up the ways of foreign countries. It’s sort of like the division in Israel today—the two groups actually cluster around two different political parties. They don’t always get along with one another because they see their Jewishness differently from one another.

So the Hellenistic Jews—many of them had not even learned to speak Hebrew, or write or read it—were living in Jerusalem. They were Jewish people who had come back home.

Then there were the long-time residents that didn’t speak Greek and could care less about Greek and had not picked up Greek ways. These were the Hebrew widows. Because the church had a welfare system—remember people were selling everything and living in common—and it was customary within the Jewish way, within the synagogue, that widows were taken care of, it also became present in the Christian synagogue, the Christian quarter that was developing in Jerusalem, to take care of their widows from the common fund.

But what was happening was that the Greek-speaking widows were feeling what they had felt in their pre-Christian experience. Namely, that there was a cultural prejudice against them, that they were not as “good as” or treated with equal deference as the Hebrew-Jewish widows. So they were murmuring. (And by the way, that word “murmur,” which occurs in the King James but not

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in the NIV, is kind of an awesome word. Because if you go back to Numbers 11, you will find the word “murmur” is there as well. It occurs in the midst of God’s people coming out of the Exodus and through the Sinai, where God had done great miracles and the people began to murmur. If you read Number 11–14, you will find that murmuring led to unbelief and unbelief led to outright rebellion. And rebellion led to a huge setback of God’s work where His people wandered for forty years in the wilderness.) Now, in Jesus Christ, God’s people have gone through a new exodus. There has been deliverance through Calvary and through the Resurrection, and a new community is being constituted by the Holy Spirit and there are signs and wonders that are part of that reconstitution of the community of God in Jerusalem. In the midst of those signs and wonders and dynamic things that God is doing, we see the echoes in the wilderness now finding their way into the life of the Early Church. Murmuring was happening again. And based on Scripture, following murmuring comes unbelief and following unbelief comes rebellion and following rebellion comes spiritual apostasy and meandering and meaningless wandering.

So this matter of murmuring must be dealt with. By the way, murmuring is such a sinister word because it denotes that those complaining aren’t really anxious about a solution, they’re just letting everybody know they’re discontent. The Scripture tells us that when we see or spot something that’s wrong or we disagree with, we’re to adopt the pattern of going to leadership, and if leadership is involved, to a person who can be directly responsible for a cure, and stating that to them. But murmuring evades and talks around the problem and gets a lot of other people in on the discontent. And it becomes a festering sore in the Body, and sometimes the murmuring has gotten to such a point that, by the time leadership gets around to dealing with it, it’s like a

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train that is running down tracks without an engineer. It's almost out of control by the time leadership can get a hold of it.

We're to check this tendency of murmuring. If there's dissatisfaction about something in the Body, we're to follow Matthew 18 very carefully, which tells us to go one on one. If that person won't hear us, take another one with us, and if they won't hear us, then expand it in a circle beyond that. But murmuring simply spreads the seeds of dissatisfaction without seeking a good solution to the problem.

How anyone in the body of Christ handles their problems is very vital. If we do not handle conflicts well, then the work of the Lord gets derailed. The church cannot go on with its ministry and people become frustrated and turn inward and there will be an apostasy within the body. To me, this murmuring is a critical test of leadership within the church. It's a critical test for the apostles. As a person who's always been around the ministry, as a pastor's kid or missionary's kid or a pastor myself, I have an observation to make: that leadership in the body of Christ must be God-called and God must grant the wisdom, because often the well-being of a body rests on the maturity and wisdom that resides in the leadership. And leadership can so easily compound problems that people have in the body of Christ with one another in conflict situations.

Let me illustrate how Peter and the other apostles could have mishandled this situation. And in mishandling it, derailed the church and stunted its growth.

Peter comes before the body and says, "We didn't ask for this. God through the Holy Spirit called us to be leaders. Jesus trained us and we're busy, out preaching everyday. We don't need this added burden in our life. Here you are, murmuring. If you're going to keep this up, we're just going to all resign *en masse* and go back to fishing in Galilee. We don't have to put up with a bunch of cry-babies. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You ought to be spending more

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time praying for us and less time griping about what you're eating. Shame! Shame on you! You Hellenistic widows. You should be more spiritual. The reason why you've got problems is that you're not praying enough. If you'd get more spiritual and less carnal, then this church would be better off. And if you're not going to straighten up, the same door you came in is the same door through which you can leave. And if you've got any other complaints, remember, 'Touch not the Lord's anointed.' And from now on, if anybody in this church complains about anything I'm doing, you're out! We're going to take you off the membership roll! That's the way it's going to be. We're going to put an end to this right now."

That kind of thing never puts an end to anything, does it? That gets the "old man" all fired up. One of the things leadership always has to do, and anyone who deals with conflicts has to take into account, is that you should never deal with conflicts from the standpoint of self-pity.

"You're causing me problems. I'm so busy. I'm so burdened, and now you're dropping this on me. It's just not fair." That's no way to deal with problems—to try to dump a bunch of guilt on other people and tell them they're not spiritual. The best way to deal with problems is to separate the problem from the personality. One of the marvelous things that Peter and the apostles do here is that they don't take the criticism personally. That's so hard, when you're in a leadership role and someone suggests you not take it personally.

They don't take it personally. They look at the problem and say, "This problem is occurring because structurally we do not have a sufficient means to meet all the needs. It's a legitimate complaint. If there's a significant group that isn't happy and is being neglected in the daily ministrations of the food, then we ought to cure that." In their low key, non-defensive response, they defuse a very troublesome situation. If ever we need respect and consideration for people when they are not acting as spiritually as we would like to see them act, that doesn't mean that

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God doesn't love them anymore. And it doesn't mean that they cease to be part of the community of God. We're going to have to find a way through problems if the church is to advance.

That's the same way, in our own personal life, by the way. When we're going through problems in our own personal life, we find that as long as that problem is there, we're stuck in that. We have an arrested spiritual development at that point. In order to break through in our spiritual life, we must find a way to resolve that issue. Sometimes the issue may not be resolved in a very short period of time. Sometimes it may take a process of a day, a month, a year or several years to work ourselves through it, with the Lord's help. But we simply must work through the problems. We cannot run off or resign or let them go.

Peter does a very important thing in proposing a solution along with the Twelve. It says, "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'" (Acts 6:2, NIV). That is one of those easily misread and misinterpreted verses in the New Testament. For it carries a false idea that the apostles were serving as maître d's, as table waiters, like at Coco's, for the church, that had a sit-down dinner everyday. It also connotes the idea that, somehow, waiting on people was beneath their calling. That is not what is being communicated here, however. The word "tables" in the Greek is the same word that's used in Matthew 21 for the tables of the moneychangers. It's also used in Matthew 25 in a form that we would call a "banker."

What evidently was happening in the church was that people were bringing their offerings; we know that they were depositing them at the apostles' feet. Remember they were not writing checks or giving currency. They had shekels. They had coins. And when you sell a property, you get a whole bag of coins, and there was nowhere to go but to lay it at somebody's feet. It was a

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collection point. They'd bring it and lay it there. Then it would be counted, and then there would be certain times when the funds would be given out. The apostles would evidently sit at those tables, not eating tables but money tables, and hand out the welfare funds. The charge was that they were being more generous with the Hebrew-speaking widows than the Greek-speaking widows. The apostles were saying, "As the church has grown, our responsibilities have grown, and we no longer have time to do this. We must give ourselves not to the deaconing of tables but to the deaconing of the Word." The word in the Greek, by the way, is for both. There's the deaconing of tables and the deaconing of the Word—the ministry of the Word, the service of the Word.

One of the things that happens—that must happen—in our life, when we're growing as a Christian, is that if you're going to do any kind of growing, you realize the points in your life where you must change gears and get used to something else now that God is going to put into your life. You can't just do things in the same old way in a church. As this church grows more and more, I find I have to continually find what the role that the Lord has for me is. The role I have in 1988 is not the same role I had in 1975. There must be a gradual change. And what happens in a church or an individual life that gets rutted is that, at that point, we're no longer willing to make changes and say, "That's the way I've always done it. That's the way it's always going to be." We no longer have the flexibility to go out and enter into new things God has for us. As a result, then other people can't get engrafted into a ministry which they are capable of doing.

So the apostles said, "We need to deacon the Word and there needs to be some other people to deacon the tables" (Acts 6:2). So they said, "Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3, NIV). Or choose seven men of good reputation is

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the idea of “those known to you.” Seven men of good reputation who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. They are not specifically in this text called “deacons,” although we always call them the first seven deacons. Where we get “deacons” is the verb form that is occurring in these verses—“to wait on tables.” There are only three qualifications the apostles put forward. They must have a good reputation. Why is that so? Because that’s part of the problem. Are these people going to be fair? If they’re not of good reputation and of impeccable character, maybe there will be those in the body who say, “You could expect ‘that’ of them.”

They must be full of wisdom. They’re going to need it to deal with the complaints.

And they must be full of the Holy Spirit. Those are still three essential qualities for leadership in the body of Christ. A good reputation, full of wisdom, and full of the Spirit.

I know some people who are full of the Spirit but aren’t full of wisdom. They are just like popcorn going off. Exploding with energy and vitality, but they can get in the stupidest situations. Then there are people full of wisdom, who are so wise but they’re not full of the Spirit. What the New Testament does is bring all of these qualities together into one office and say, “Those who are in leadership must be graced with these qualities.” And having said this, there’s then the choice of the congregation, who they’re going to select to be these seven.

One of the things we learn in the New Testament is that there are different models of church government. One kind of model of church government is elder-dominated church government. We especially see this in the Timothy and Titus letters. In those letters, we are dealing with the establishment of young missionary churches who have people in them who by and large do not have background of biblical training or a reference point in their own spiritual background. They’re Gentiles coming out of a pagan environment. Therefore, the churches in those areas appear to be elder-dominated. That is, the offices in the church occur by the appointment of the

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leadership. Paul appoints Timothy, Timothy appoints elders, and the church itself appears to have little choice in the selection of its leaders.

But another model of church government we find here in Acts 6 is the model which is used in the churches where there is more spiritual maturity and more background in the Word, and that is congregational church government, where the congregation itself participates in the elective decisions within the body. All the apostles do is set down the general criteria for the leadership and then say to the congregation, who do you want to appoint to this? And the congregation makes the decision, and not the elders. That's the kind of model, by the way, we use in this church. The congregation makes the decision.

So they chose seven. If you look at the names of the seven they chose, you'll see an interesting phenomenon occurring. All seven of the men who are chosen have Greek names, not Jewish names. Which is a way of saying that the Early Church bent over backwards to satisfy the Greek-speaking widows who had the complaint to begin with. So they basically were saying—the whole Hebrew wing of the church was saying, “We would never want to discriminate against you. So, as to give you the most perfect assurance and comfort that we're with you and that we're one in Christ, let's have everybody in this role with a Greek-speaking name.” That's what they did.

And the church relaxed. Now, internally the church had been reorganized. A whole new division of leadership had emerged underneath the broad division of leadership of the apostles. Because now there was better networking of the church's needs to be met internally, there could have a more external, expansive growth. So what do we find happening as a result of their settling the problem and letting the apostles be free to pray and minister or deacon the Word? We find the Word of God spreading. The number of disciples in Jerusalem, the NIV says, “increased.” The

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King James says, “multiplied.” Always before in the church, the church had grown through addition. The Lord added to the church. But now, for the first time, the church is multiplying. Geometric progression. A large number of priests became obedient to the faith. These are the priestly Levites who serve on the Temple Mount for the sacrifices and do the ordinances of temple worship. They are believing—a new breakthrough there.

So when a church works through its problems, it goes on and gets a whole new spurt of growth. But as long as it has unresolved issues, it plateaus. It seems to me that, in the last year or so, we have been at a point where we are looking at some of our critical problems. For example, our space problems for groups. We have every classroom in use and do not have the room to create the smaller communities that we need to have effective fellowshiping within the church. That can be an impediment to growth unless we solve that problem. And we vitally need to have more and more people involved in ministry at all levels of the church. As we get these problems solved and get the clear mind of the Holy Spirit in them and create new positions of leadership responsibility in the church, we’ll also see this new thrust, which I believe is going to be part of our church in 1988. I see God doing some very special things in the body to help us get on with the mission we have in this community, so that the church will not only add but multiply.

Whenever we solve the problems, as the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom, then we can progress.

The phrase “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (verse 7, NIV), is immediately followed by a reference to Stephen. I think there’s a connection between the two. One of the things that was happening in the Early Church was that Jesus became an “add on” to the Jewishness of the church. Nothing had changed for the believers except that they confessed, on top of their Jewishness, that Jesus was Lord. People were still fulfilling all the dietary requirements, the kosher requirements. They were still going to the temple, even though Christ,

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the perfect sacrifice, had been sacrificed. People were still going to the temple every day, participating in the worship at the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice, offering personal sacrifices, engaging in the ritual purification of baptism before entering into the temple—all these kinds of things. And Stephen was going to come along and begin to draw some implications that would (if you will) jump the church out of its cocoon of Judaic life and culture, catapult it out of that into the broad world of the Gentile mainstream. Stephen would be charged with two things. Those two charges would later be repeated in Acts 21 against Paul, two decades later. Identical charges. The charges were that he speaks against this Law and this place (that is, the temple).

As a matter of fact, reading Stephen's defense closely, he never explicitly says to set aside the law of Moses. And he never explicitly said that the temple was irrelevant. But it is clear, from reading between the lines, that Stephen has begun to say that if we have been set free by Christ, if we have been liberated from the law, if salvation is by grace through faith rather than bondage to works, what are we still doing participating in a lifestyle which mandates a relationship with God on the terms of the law? Should we not set it aside and only use it as a schoolmaster to Christ? And why are we still worshipping in the temple and engaging in the services of the priesthood when, as believers, we're all priests unto God and there is no need for further sacrifice because the better sacrifice has come and the better altar has been given. I think, if you look strategically at the New Testament, you'll find that the core of the Book of Hebrews—which so eloquently expands Stephen's preaching—is Stephen's breakthrough, who begins to read the implications of the Christian faith in the Jewish community of the first church. He's saying, "We've got to rethink what we're believing and practicing in light of what Christ has done." How relevant is the Law to us? How relevant is keeping a kosher kitchen, for example?

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I had the joy, while I was in Jerusalem, of eating Sabbath dinner in the home of a friend.

Observant Jews. I knew from the hotels in Jerusalem that, for example, you can't sit in a restaurant and have a meat meal and then get cream in your coffee because you never mix a meat and a dairy product. You don't eat a cheeseburger, for example. By parliamentary law, for any food establishment within the Israel part (not the West Bank), if an establishment is to be licensed to serve food, they must either have a dairy kitchen along with a dairy restaurant and a meat kitchen with a meat restaurant. You cannot mix the two together. If you do, you'll lose your license and that will put you out of business. In a kosher home, for example, one part of the kitchen prepares the dairy kinds of products and the other part of the kitchen provides the meat products. When you're eating in a home, you cannot mix plates. There are certain plates used for the dairy products and they cannot be turned around and used for the meat products. Even if you wash them. Those plates must not be mixed. So after the meal, rather than having cream with the coffee at the table, you eat the meal and then retire to the living room, and then it would be alright to take coffee with cream because you have separated the two.

Where does all that come from? From a verse in Exodus, "Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19). The mixing of the meat and the dairy product was forbidden by the interpretation of that verse.

Stephen is, in all likelihood, beginning to challenge that. Peter will later have a vision in Acts 10 which outright challenges it, that says the dietary code as binding upon Christians is now irrelevant and the Law has been made irrelevant on that issue for Christian belief and practice.

Everyone from the Early Church from Acts 1 through Acts 5, knew the meaning of animal sacrifice and participation in temple ordinances. Now you've got gobs of priests coming into the church and they're going to bring their own theological distinctive with them and it isn't long

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after that that Stephen is made a deacon and winds up preaching. That often happens, by the way, with promotion to places of service. Suddenly, one finds himself in a new area of responsibility and finds that God has equipped them for even more. So Stephen begins preaching in a synagogue called the “Synagogue of the Freed Men.” That’s a great term for a church.

All of the preaching so far in the Book of Acts has been in the temple, out in public. This is the first preaching in a synagogue. There’s a vast difference between a synagogue and a temple.

There was only one temple. It was in Jerusalem. But all over Judaism, from the time of Ezra on, there were synagogues which literally meant “to gather together.” Places of worship which were the predecessor of the church. They had three purposes: to teach religious instruction, to worship, and to provide socialization for the people. In Jerusalem, there were synagogues. One of those synagogues, the Synagogue of the Freed Men—evidently the descendants of slaves who had been deported from Jerusalem in 63 B.C. by Pompeii to Rome and other places—these people now had come back and they from Cilicia, an area in North Africa (current Libya), and Alexandria, which had the largest Jewish community in the world outside of Israel at that time, and then Eastern Turkey and Asia which is in Western Turkey.

Guess who was from the province of Cilicia in the New Testament? Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was in Cilicia. Who do you think was in the Synagogue of the Freed Men listening to Stephen preach? Why is it that in Acts 8:1 we find that the robes were laid at Saul’s feet? Saul had sat there and dialogued with Stephen and hit him head on regarding the issues of the relevance of the Law and the temple. “Stephen preached in that synagogue with tremendous power. They could not stand up against his wisdom or the spirit by which he spoke” (Acts 6:9–10) Many people think that Stephen landed in trouble with the Sanhedrin because he preached the resurrection of Christ. That is to misread Acts. Peter and John had preached the Resurrection and wound up in

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prison, but then they were let go. The apostles had preached the Resurrection before the Sanhedrin, and were beaten and then released. But they were still carrying on their work. Stephen was not brought before the Sanhedrin on the ground that he was preaching the resurrected Christ. He was brought before the Sanhedrin on the ground that he spoke against the Law and the temple. Those were the charges. What he was doing was a step beyond what any of the apostles were doing. He would say, “Here are the implications of our newfound faith in Christ. If Christ has come, if a better priest has come, if the sacrifice of all sacrifices has been given, what do we need all this ritual for anymore? What do we need the temple for anymore?” He was evidently not advocating the physical abolition of the temple. He was advocating its irrelevance.

When you challenge religious tradition, you are in hot water. And he did challenge it. And he spoke so forcefully that people could not argue. So what happens when you have political power and lose an argument? You use your political power and forget reasoning. You always know you’ve lost the contest of ideas when you have to resort to force to implement your ideas. I think ultimately, in the economy of God, that is why Marxism and Islam will fail. Because, in order to succeed, they must advance their ideas by political persecution and force. And Christianity, whenever it is true Christianity, will always let people be free to make decisions and will allow a plurality of expression. That’s why in America, which had a Judaic Christian base, we were secure enough to allow dissent and freedom and never require that people belong to a state or religion. But in areas of the world where people are insecure in their philosophies of life—Marxism or Islam or whatever—they make the rule “Thou shalt not proselytize.” Or “Thou shalt not try to convert anyone,” that very faith, by that expression, is saying, “Our ideas are so weak we cannot support them. We must resort to the force of the state to uphold them.”

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The argument against Stephen is being lost on the intellectual plane and on the spiritual plane, so they bring him before the Sanhedrin. This is the fourth time the issue of Jesus has been before the Sanhedrin. It will only be before the Sanhedrin one more time in the New Testament period. That will be in Acts 21, when Paul comes before it. The issue of Jesus was before the Sanhedrin, first when the Lord was tried and judged by it. Secondly, when Peter and John (Acts 3) appeared before them. Thirdly, Acts 5, when the Twelve apostles appeared before the Sanhedrin. Now the fourth time, the issue of Jesus is before them. This time, there is no Gamaliel to save Stephen. Also, there has evidently been a hiatus in the appearance of a new Roman government so that against Stephen the Sanhedrin itself may exercise capital punishment. Something they could not have done in the time of Christ because Pilate, the Roman ruler, was there.

“‘We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.’ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:14-15, NIV). He was ready, glowing, prayed-up. There are a number of prison speeches in the Book of Acts, or should I say, “arraignment speeches,” where people are brought before political bodies or religious bodies and told to give a witness. What is interesting about every single speech, whether it’s Stephen’s speech or a number of Paul’s speeches, is that in no single case is the person in the dock concerned about getting a personal acquittal. Not one of them is using legal niceties to try to get off the hook. Each of them take the occasion to go after the main point and to proclaim Christ, and they are attempting to win their audience to Christ, not get themselves off the hook. If the best strategy of defense is a solid offense, then these speeches demonstrate that.

If I were to take the time to read Acts 7 for you, by the time I got through the 53 verses of Stephen’s speech, half of us would be asleep and the other half would be thinking about what we

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were going to do after church. I have a tendency, after reading that address, to say, “Why would anybody get excited about this? This is just old history. He’s just reciting the history of God’s people.” But Stephen knows what he’s doing and he has been accused of breaking the Law of Moses and speaking against the temple. So he takes great pains in his address to show what a good Jew he is. He starts out by addressing the Sanhedrin as “brothers and fathers”—“I’m one of you,” that’s what he means by that term. Then he goes on to note the highlights of Israel’s history. Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses and the giving of the Law, Solomon and the temple. And he says, “Wherever God has raised up men of faith, Israel has rebelled against those men of faith and this same pattern has been repeated in Jesus of Nazareth,” when he gets to his bottom line. “This same pattern has been repeated in Jesus of Nazareth. You are stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart. You always rebel against the prophets” (Acts 7:51).

I might note that he is saying this to the Sanhedrin and not to the Jewish people as a whole, lest people read this as some kind of anti-Semitic tirade. There are people like that who look at speeches of this New Testament and say, “The anti-Semitism of Germany and World War II can be directly traced to the New Testament.” I took a course in race-relationships one time. The professor made the outstanding statement that anti-Semitism in the Christian west traces its roots to the New Testament. I said, “What?” I went and talked to him about that. He gave me the opportunity to present a paper in class rebutting his position, which I was glad to do. Basically, the New Testament is Jews talking to Jews. And Stephen doesn’t say anything that the prophets don’t say. Just like, as a pastor, I could sometimes—if I had a prophetic call—speak harshly to you to bring you to faith. Stephen is speaking harshly to his own people to bring them to faith. God won’t put up with a rebellious heart.

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One of the things, by the way, that we should notice in Stephen's address—and this is not his main point but something I got out of it for myself—is looking at the similarity of Abraham and Joseph and Moses and Jesus, you will find that all of them are linked by certain things. All of their activity is initiated by God's call. They elect, by personal choice, to respond to that call. After responding, there is a period of time in which there's something God promises which seems unattainable. Abraham was promised a land and a seed and it looked like that was down the tubes. Joseph was promised that his mother and father and brothers would bow down to him and he's in prison in Egypt. Jesus was promised that He would reign and yet He is in a tomb. I would suggest that, in your own life, any ministry or person that I know that's been used by the Lord has been used because, first of all, God called them to do something. Secondly, they agreed with that call. Then after agreeing with that call, God led them through a time when it looked like everything that God called them to do was down the tubes. And it was dead. It was over. And it wasn't going to happen at all. That's the testing. That's the refining point of ministry and calling. You may be in a place like that in your own life at this point. What you do in those death-filled times is so critically important because it's vital in those times that one continue to trust in the God who called and in the choice one made to follow God. Following that death of the dream, there comes a powerful resurrection or reconstitution or reclamation by God in which He brings to fruition that which He has promised. Abraham is given a seed. Joseph is given his family. And Jesus is given the kingdom through the Resurrection.

That's a marvelous analogy that we can make as we walk through Acts 7. That's how the Lord guides us in our spiritual pilgrimage. So don't be afraid of those times when you feel like the heavens are closed and you're not hearing from God. You've prayed about something happening

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in your life and it seems like it's down the tubes. If God truly called you, it's not over. Just keep walking in those moments by faith and God will bring you through that.

Stephen's ringing address to the Sanhedrin brings a furious response. "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him" (Acts 7:54, NIV). Then comes a very critical verse—verse 55. "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit..." We have looked at that term "full of the Holy Spirit" in a number of contexts in the Book of Acts. I've noted the first usage of it occurs in Acts 2:4, but immediately after that, in other places (in Acts 2 and 3), Peter and the other apostles are subsequently described as being filled with the Holy Spirit. I suggested that when subsequent terms are used, what it represents is that the filling of the Spirit is not a once and for all event, but it is a series of fillings, beginning with the baptism of the Holy Spirit; but since we are expandable and the Spirit is infinite, we are capable of receiving more and He is capable of giving more. When we find ourselves in difficult situations, our lives are being stretched and, therefore, because they're stretched like a balloon, we have need for more wind or more air or more *pneuma*, the Spirit of God. Stephen is facing death. He has never been in a situation like this. When he was chosen to be a deacon, he was described as being filled with the Spirit, but now, when he was preaching in the synagogue—a new opportunity—he was again filled with the Spirit. Here he is facing death. The word we give to him is "martyr," which is the Greek word for "witness." A witness is someone who so believes in what he believes that he is willing to die for what he believes. That's why we give him the term "martyr." It simply means "witness." Stephen is now going to be a martyr. He is the first Christian to die after the resurrection of Christ, other than Ananias and Sapphira, whose identity as Christians is debatable.

He is filled with the Spirit. When you're filled with the Spirit, what's gone? Anger is gone.

Retaliation is gone. Stephen doesn't look at them and become a mirror image of their actions, or

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grimace at them. They are furious and gnash their teeth. What does Stephen do? Does he say, “God will get you for this, you dirty sinners! You’re going to hell. You’re a bunch of reprobates, all of you!” Some people, in delivering the news of the judgment of God, get a little bit too much glee out of it. It almost makes them happy that God is going to “get” somebody. As somebody has said, “Jesus is coming back and boy, is He mad!”

Stephen is full of the Spirit, he looks up to heaven, sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55). Stephen’s eyes are not on his accusers, not on his situation. His face is a mirror of the upward look, which is so necessary in life when we’re going through deep conflict and trial. It’s hard to do—to look from the horizon to the vertical and reflect the glory of the Lord. I love the phrase that says, “Stephen sees the Lord standing at the right hand of God.” The epistles tell us that when Christ ascended into heaven (Ephesians 4), “He sat down at the right hand of God.” Signifying that He had been invested with office and was now on the throne, reigning. But when Stephen sees Him, he doesn’t see Him sitting, but standing. I think the reason why he sees Him standing is because of the gentlemanly nature of the Lord, who just like when someone enters the room, if we’re a courteous person, we stand to greet them. Jesus knows that shortly Stephen is coming into His presence and He’s already risen from His throne, He’s standing to meet Stephen. I would suggest that’s a marvelous thing to keep in mind.

I get troubled when I watch our contemporary practices as Christians. We’re so busy praying for healing right up to the end that there are times we don’t know when to let go and really concentrate on the fact that death is the means by which we are going to enter into the Lord’s presence. And rather than seeing death as defeat, we can see it as a great entry into His presence. “Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou are with me” (Psalm 23:4). Stephen saw the Lord standing. He said, “I see heaven open and the Son

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of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56, NIV). This smacks against the Judaic faith, which cannot hold to the possibility of a Trinity. God in one, yet Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It strikes the observant ear as blasphemy. “They covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (Acts 7:57-58, NIV).

This stoning, by Jewish practice, was not an indiscriminate thing. It was specified that, for execution, a person was led out to a precipices which had to be at least two times as tall as he was. He was pushed over the precipice. If that fall did not break his neck and kill him, then a priest, an executioner, someone skilled in the method of detecting life versus death, a priest was placed at the bottom of the cliff next to the body, and the first witness came and took a rock (not a pebble) and dropped it on him. Then he was inspected again. Was he dead? The idea was mercy. You don’t keep dropping rocks on a dead person. It was a formal execution. Witness after witness comes and drops a rock until the person is dead. This was the means by which Stephen’s death occurred. But while they were stoning him, Stephen prayed. Again notice, he is not a mirror image of his accusers. Since he is full of the Spirit, he is full of forgiveness. He says, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59, NIV). Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (verse 60, NIV). He learned to pray that way from the Lord: “Father forgive them. Do not hold this sin against them” (Luke 23:34).

Then the Scripture says he fell asleep. That word “asleep” is a term commonly used in the New Testament for a Christian’s death. It’s as though for a Christian “death” is too hard a word. So the euphemism is used—asleep—because that represents it not being soul sleep (it’s not advocating soul sleep) it’s simply saying “You didn’t die, you didn’t cease to exist.” You’re asleep, and you’re with the Lord.

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And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered through Judea and Samaria—the West Bank, by the way, if you’re wondering where that is on today’s map. “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church going from house to house [he’s a real nice guy!] he dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8:2–3).

That’s the point I’d like to end this evening with. I’d like to draw these two chapters together in a final resolution. I said tonight that my title was “What Good Can Come Out of Trouble?” We started off by looking at Acts 6, which brought the emergence of Stephen. And looked at this chain of cause-and-effect relationships. Because there was church trouble, there emerged a person named Stephen. Because Stephen was put in a place of responsibility, he began preaching. In his preaching, he spoke about the implications of the Christian faith in a way that none of the apostles were doing. Because he did this, he was brought in direct confrontation with the religious establishment as well as someone named Saul of Tarsus, to whom his words were a “goad,” like an ox goad. Because of that, Stephen was martyred. Because Stephen was martyred, the church was persecuted and scattered. Because the church was scattered, Philip went up to Samaria and people, for the first time in Samaria, began hearing the gospel because the church was scattered. Some went as far as Antioch in Syria and founded a church, not only to the Jews but to the Gentiles. And because of that scattering, ultimately, the apostle Paul—on his way then as “Saul of Tarsus” to first Damascus, and perhaps beyond that, ultimately to Antioch—is struck down and he can no longer deal with Stephen’s clear witness of Jesus, which has become a goad to him. As the Lord says to Saul on the road to Damascus, “Why do you kick against the pricks?” Why are you going against these sharp stones at the heels of a cart where an ox couldn’t

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kick up its heels and just run away with the cart? They were there to jam the heels. Stephen's preaching was doing that to Saul's gut. It was sticking in him. And the Lord says, "Why do you kick against this?" And because there was a church at Antioch, ultimately, Saul of Tarsus comes to that church as a Christian and as an apostle later in his life and there is a blessing that flows out of that church back to Jerusalem. All of this...In other words, if there had never been a church problem, we wouldn't have had two-thirds of the New Testament. It all began when there was a church problem and Stephen started preaching. Cause and effect. All the way through. You can trace it.

What good is coming out of trouble? Good is coming out of trouble! God is working His purposes to refine His church. In our own life, God's doing the same thing, if we don't jump tracks but let Him patiently work on us, take the trouble in our own life and simply wait upon the Lord. The cause-and-effect relationship is not seen most of the time within a short period of time. It takes a while to see it work out. But God doeth all things well when we put our faith and our trust in Him. He doeth all things well. He did in the Early Church. Persecution doesn't become defeat. Stephen's martyrdom, instead of becoming a negative thing in the church, becomes a rallying cry. And his message brings a whole new vitality to the church. It helps cut the umbilical cord to its Jewishness, setting it on the course which will take it to the broader compass of every man and woman in the world. God is working for good in our lives.