

Open Heart, Open Bible

Joshua and Acts of the Apostles

Linking Theme: Fulfilment

Passage for weekly reading (week 32):

Acts 5 – 8

The First Church

The pooling of resources in a common pot for the meeting of needs is a godly principle, but it can so easily expose human frailty. So it was with Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias' sin lay in withholding money secretly, rather than not giving the entire proceeds of sale. Sapphira lies in the same way, and her own demise is as sudden as his. People can die supernaturally, as well as being raised to life supernaturally! There were no hangers-on in this church (v.13)! Genuine believers, however, continued to be added to the congregation, and the miraculous was "normal".

As has been the case throughout the history of the church, opposition to the Spirit of God comes from deadened, hierarchical religion (v.17). Nothing, however, can chain the word of God (2 Tim.2 v.9), and a little angelic help makes all the difference! The apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin to give account. The interrogation takes a very similar line to the earlier incident described in ch.4, after the healing of the cripple at the Gate. Peter, if anything, is even more assertive on this occasion, and Gamaliel's sage advice to the leaders diffuses the tension. Peter and his friends escape with a flogging – **“rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name”** (v.41). The good news continues to spread throughout the City.

Growth, however, is usually associated with pain, and the word of God hides nothing respecting the difficulties experienced in this first fellowship of believers. So far there has been dishonesty within and persecution without, and now the issue is unfairness in ch.6. Organisational lack is the cause, not unusual in a rapidly increasing family! Deacons (servers) were appointed, and the problem soon solved. The focus of the apostles is very significant – **prayer and the ministry of the word** (v.4).

Obviously, there was more to the seven deacons than faithful dependability – Stephen, in particular, who seemed to be used of God in like manner to the apostles themselves. Opposition to his teaching was exactly parallel to the opposition that our Lord had faced so recently, being accused again of undermining the law of Moses, and the temple rites associated with it.

(The “Freedmen” were probably a band made up of former slaves who had found release back in Jerusalem. Israel’s traditions were deeply ingrained into their lifestyles, and were part of their new-found dignity.)

In his defence to the Sanhedrin, Stephen gives a very knowledgeable summary of the nation’s history. The fact that he is able to do this speaks volumes for his respect of the law which came through Moses, and of his deep appreciation of the call of God on national life. The speech climaxes with Stephen’s assertion, backed up by his familiarity with the prophecy of Isaiah (Is.66 v.’s 1&2), that no temple made by man can be adequate to contain worship to the living God, and he turns on his accusers with penetrating ferocity. The man now about to be martyred was filled with the Holy Spirit, and could only see a vision of heaven before him, whilst those about to stone him were consumed by their own demonic rage. A “young man” named Saul not only witnessed Stephen’s death, but also approved of it. The church is now scattered much more widely, and Saul continues to play a leading role as persecution and intimidation escalates.

Whenever men, under the influence of satan, try to extinguish a work of God, their efforts always backfire. So we see here, as the believers are scattered but inevitably take the gospel with them into Judea and Samaria. Refer back to Acts 1 v.8. It’s all in the plan! Philip takes on something of Stephen’s mantle, and crowds gather round him. His preaching is accompanied by the same signs as those which accompanied that of the apostles in Jerusalem (5 v.16). The visit of Peter and John consolidates Philip’s endeavours, and those who had come to faith in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit (v.17). Simon the sorcerer is anxious to jump on the bandwagon (and is prepared to pay for the privilege!), and is roundly rebuked by Peter. There does seem to be a certain God-fear in his reaction to Peter’s discernment of his spirit (v.24), but we are not told what happened to him subsequently. The important thing is that the gospel continues to be preached in places which may not have heard it so soon, but for the persecution.

Philip is still very much under orders, and this chapter concludes with the fascinating encounter with the Ethiopian official, or eunuch. Eunuchs were castrated males who guarded the wives and concubines in pagan households, especially royal households. It was the only way in which a master or monarch could trust such an official. The kings of Israel and Judah used their services as the monarchies became less God-fearing (see 2 Kings 9 v.32, or Jeremiah 38 v.7). This particular official had travelled to Jerusalem with a genuine desire to worship, but would have to remain at a distance because of his condition (see Deut.23 v.1). Quite possibly he was representing his queen in making the visit. Either way, he was a God-seeker. God now seeks him, and uses Philip in the process. Philip was delighted to be a partner in this divinely arranged Bible study. The official was equally delighted to have been both enlightened and baptised so effortlessly.

The evangelist disappears even more abruptly than he arrived, and takes the gospel out to Caesaria on the Mediterranean coast, via Azotus and a few other townships. Can it really happen this quickly?

Food for thought / discussion / prayer

1) The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira are something of a N.T. parallel to the death of Achan recorded in Joshua 7. Then, as now, deliberate sin could not be allowed to impede the Lord's work amongst those He had chosen. A great fear goes through the church as a result – not surprisingly! (5 v.'s 11&13 – a fear affecting both believers and unbelievers) This fear did, nevertheless produce growth (v.14), and healing and deliverance continued apace. Let's not just read of these wonderful works dispassionately, but seek the Lord that He might “**renew them in our day**” (Habakkuk 3 v.2).

2) The apostles' attitude to their flogging is salutary – they rejoiced because “**they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name**”. Should we be called upon to stand for Jesus in costly ways in the days ahead, let's meditate on this reaction and pray that we would follow in their footsteps. We may need to!

3) Stephen's speech is a telling early example of Jesus' teaching in Matt.10 v.'s 18-20. We are not told that he used any notes! The scriptures poured out of him in an irresistible way. That is why we need a working knowledge of the word of God for ourselves. Perhaps we won't be in such a desperate situation as the one in which Stephen found himself, but read 2 Tim.3 v.16 again. We must be equipped!

4) The gospel spreads through persecution. What man intends for evil, God uses to good (see Gen. 50 v.20). It is Rom. 8 v.28 in operation again! Let's be encouraged by these thrilling scriptures, and be available to the Lord to work His works through us.

Next week's passage: Acts 9 – 12