

# The Christian Arsenal

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## ACTS 6:1-8:40

Last week we saw how Satan sought to enter the early church by getting Ananias and Sapphira to lie to God about their giving. We also saw the Sadducees come against the church as they had the apostles jailed and then flogged.

Today, we're going to see more of Satan's **subtle** attacks as well as his more **flagrant** attacks.

The very first thing we see is that a dispute began in the church over the serving of the Hellenistic widows.

We need to understand here that **these folks were all Jewish**...but there was a distinct difference between the Hebrew Jews and the Hellenistic Jews.

The Hebrew Jews were exactly what their name implies. They were Jews who were born in Israel and spoke Aramaic. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews. These were folks who had been dispersed...they had lived in Gentile areas and had become greatly influenced by the Greco-Roman world before moving back to Israel.

The Hebrews tended to be very narrow and rigid, with few interests outside their own small world...the Hellenists, on the other hand, tended to be more in tune with the Gentile world, more in tune with its cultural world and its love of art and knowledge.

I said all that simply to say this...the tension between the Hebrew Jews and the Hellenistic Jews was not a new thing. It went back a long time, but now this tension had crept into the church.

As we saw last week...the early church took care of its poor. They also took care of their widows and the Hellenistic widows felt they were being discriminated against.

**What an opportunity for Satan to come in and wreck havoc. But the apostles were determined to nip this in the bud.**

And they didn't do it alone. They involved the whole church. They knew they couldn't pray and study and preach and teach and win folks to Jesus and plant churches **and** make sure their widows were properly and fairly taken care of.

So the congregation selected seven men **verse 3...** "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit, full of wisdom..."

These men are named in **verse 5**, and among them were a man named **Stephen** and a man named **Philip**. We'll see much more of Stephen and Philip as we go along today.

Now, don't miss the truth we learn from this. All the congregation came together. Satan would love to have had a giant church split, wouldn't he? I mean, churches have split over things a lot less significant than this, haven't they? But, these folks saw the need, and together they came up with a solution. They elected these first deacons as servants of the widows, and as we shall see in just a moment, **they were also men who knew the Scripture and had a heart for the souls of their fellow Jews as well as the world outside the Jewish nation.**

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Also, I want to quickly point out one thing that you might miss...

**Verse 7...** "a great company of priests were obedient to the faith..."

Last week we mentioned the veil of the Temple being torn from top to bottom...something only God could have done...something He did as a sign that from the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on, anyone is welcome into His presence.

**Up until Jesus' crucifixion, no one was allowed in the Holy of Holies except the High Priest and then only once a year. Up until then, God had said, "Stay out of there. You're not welcome there! You're not worthy to enter!" But after the veil was torn in two, God said, "Come on in, how long can you stay?"**

I believe these priests who came to Jesus had seen that torn veil! I believe they had been convinced then and there of the truth of the Gospel. While some of the priests patched that veil up and carried on business as usual, a great many priests believed and were obedient to the faith!

**Verse 8** introduces us to a deacon named Stephen. Let's look at how Stephen came to be the first martyr of the early church.

**Verses 8-15...**

When these men couldn't win in their debate against Stephen they had false witnesses come forward to give testimony that Stephen had blasphemed Moses and God.

They were determined to stop Stephen any way they could and they had him brought before the Council. What follows in **chapter 7** is Stephen's defense. What Stephen did through a very eloquent presentation was remind them of **their past heritage and God's past faithfulness**.

Stephen began way back with Abraham. He reminded these "religious men" of how God established the Jewish race of people...how Abraham was given God's promise of an inheritance that would be handed down from generation to generation, even though Abraham had no child.

He told them about how the Jews would be enslaved for 400 years. Stephen told them about Joseph and how he rose to power in Egypt and how he saved his family (and the Jewish nation) by bringing them down to Egypt. Stephen reminded them that a Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph and the Jews were mistreated and taken advantage of for many years.

Stephen reminded them of the birth of Moses and how he was rescued from death by Pharaoh's daughter and raised and educated in the Egyptian culture. Stephen told of how Moses fled Egypt after it became known that he had killed an Egyptian. Stephen told them of the burning bush and how God told Moses to go and rescue His people from oppression in Egypt and bring them into the Land of Promise.

**Verse 35...**

Stephen goes on to remind them of how they fell away from God and worshipped idols. Stephen even tells them of Joshua and David and Solomon. In fact, Stephen quoted from **Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Amos, and Isaiah** in his defense before the Council of religious leaders.

**Stephen knew God's Word.**

**Stephen lived God's Word.**

**Stephen had hidden God's Word in his heart that he might not sin against God.**

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**Stephen feared God rather than man.**

**Verses 51-53...**

Stephen was not afraid to lay blame where it rightfully belonged. Stephen didn't care if he angered the religious leaders...Stephen just told the truth!

These men had falsely accused Stephen of blaspheming the Law of Moses but Stephen was telling them it was **they** who had done this!

**Verse 54...**

I want you to imagine with me their reaction to this. When Stephen began his defense, the men were probably very interested in what Stephen was saying. They probably were enjoying hearing about their heritage and how they came to be the "apple of God's eye."

But then, about midway through this defense, Stephen began to tell them of how their fathers were idolators and killers of God's prophets. And then, **Stephen stopped speaking of their past and began speaking of their present.**

When Stephen began accusing them of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and always resisting the Holy Spirit...

When Stephen began telling them how they were guilty of not keeping the very Law they had accused Stephen of blaspheming, what happened?

**They were furious! And these spiritual leaders of Israel began to act like a pack of wild dogs!!**

**Acts 7:55-8:1...**

What a picture of God's grace!!

Remember that Jesus had already told His disciples that they were not to be afraid when they would be called upon to face councils and courts and kings. Jesus told them He would give them the words they were to say in that hour...and that's what He had done! The Holy Spirit had filled and anointed Stephen to stand solidly on the divine rock of revelation and to say exactly the right things...

**Not the right things to save Stephen's life, but the right things to bring glory to Jesus! Although Stephen was killed, he was not the victim, but the victor! Death merely ushered him into the presence of Jesus! Stephen glorified Jesus and Jesus stood to honor his faithful servant!!!**

**Chapter 8:1a...**there was someone observing it all...in fact, agreeing with all of it...a man named Saul.

**Verses 1b-3...**

We see a great persecution arising against the church...a persecution so great that all the believers except the apostles were forced to scatter. We also see the Holy Spirit making sure we knew Saul was doing a great deal of the persecution.

**Verse 4...**

Many times, God takes the things we see as horrible and uses them for His glory. Here we see the gospel spreading because of the persecution.

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The word “scattered” can mean two different things in the Greek. It can mean

1) dispersed so that the item is gone from that point on...(as you would scatter ashes on the ocean waves...)

2) dispersed in order to be planted...(as a farmer scatters seeds that will spring up)

The believers were scattered because of persecution, but what resulted was that they were planted in places in order to preach the Gospel and bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

We see Philip going to Samaria. This is the same Philip we saw today in **chapter 6**. Philip is the first missionary named in Scripture. Philip is the only one in Scripture actually called “an evangelist”...**Acts 21:8**.

**Up until the preaching of the Gospel had been confined to Jerusalem. Thousands had been won to Jesus in Jerusalem. Now, beginning in chapter 8, the Gospel expands to Samaria and Philip is the evangelist who takes it there.**

We see Philip working miracles. We see Philip healing folks with unclean spirits. We see Philip encountering a man named Simon. Simon was a sorcerer, a magician.

**Verses 11-24...**

Before we get into the story of Simon, let's look at **verses 14-16...**

We need to remember that the Samaritans and the Jews were kin to each other, but they had no use for each other. The Samaritans were not full blooded Jews and because of that the Jews looked down on the Samaritans and considered them inferior.

So, the Holy Spirit was imparted to the Samaritans by the laying on of hands to validate them...to abolish the age-old historic view that they were second-class citizens.

Nowadays, we receive the Holy Spirit the moment we are saved, but in the transition stage, as here in Samaria, formal identification of the Samaritans was necessary. **This prayer cemented the fellowship between people long separated by racial and religious prejudice.** The apostles abolished **their** prejudice by praying for their newfound brethren that they might be equal members of the body of Christ; the Samaritans abolished **their** prejudice by accepting the blessing from their Jewish brethren.

Now, with that said...let's look at this man, Simon, the sorcerer.

**Was he a true believer or not?**

Commentators differ on this, but I must say the overwhelming majority of commentators I read this week believe Simon was an unbeliever...that the belief mentioned in **verse 13** was a belief in Philip's signs and wonders...not a true belief in the Lord Jesus and His atonement at Calvary. See, faith that doesn't transform the life is not saving faith. **“Faith without works is dead.”** The demons also believe...and they tremble!

But, for the sake of argument, let's look at it both ways...

If Simon was a saved man, out of the will of God...at the very least, he was trying to “buy” God's blessings. Beloved, you cannot buy God's blessings. God's salvation and His blessings are free gifts to you and me. We don't have enough money to buy His salvation, or His blessings, do we?

I learned a very interesting thing this week as I was studying for this lesson. I learned that in church history there is a practice named for this man. “Simony” is “the crime of buying or selling ecclesiastic preferment.”

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We see this practice so plainly in the Catholic church. During medieval times, it became common practice for folks to buy papal favors or to buy their way into heaven by the purchase of indulgences to release their souls from purgatory. (My husband and I were watching a program not so long ago about one of the great cathedrals in Rome...I believe it was St. Peter's...and the narrator of the documentary said that indulgences came about because the church needed money to finish the "building program" and they began to sell "forgiveness of sin").

But, lest we become smug as Baptists who don't do things like that...I believe sometimes we think we can "buy" favor from God by our service, our giving, our church attendance...in short, our works.

Back to Simon...

Maybe Simon really was not a Christian, but thought he was, because he had believed in **something!** I think there are so many folks in our churches who have believed in **something!** They've made that "belief" public, and even been "baptized"...but they're lost. They are tares among wheat. (***Some of us sitting in this very room can attest to that, can't we?***)

Maybe Simon was a pretender. He knew he wasn't a Christian all along. He simply saw the power of the Holy Spirit that was demonstrated in the life of Philip and he coveted it. The power of the Holy Spirit made his little magical powers look rather insignificant! I believe Simon was a "great pretender."

Well, we not only see Simon trying to buy the power of the Holy Spirit...but we also see his receiving a strong admonition from the Apostle Paul.

Peter admonishes Simon to repent and pray for forgiveness. This isn't just sweet advice...in fact, the Phillips translation of the New Testament reads like this:

***"To hell with you and your money! How dare you think you could buy the gift of God for money! You can have no share or part in this matter, for your heart is not honest before God. All you can do now is to repent of this wickedness of yours and pray earnestly to the Lord that if possible the evil intention of your heart may be forgiven. For I can see inside you, and I see a man bitter with jealousy and bound with his own sin!"***

Added to this...Simon "cops out" in **verse 24**.

Beloved, when we sin, we must pray for our own forgiveness. We can support each other in prayer, but we must pray for our own forgiveness.

I want to say this right here...we cannot be saved simply because others have prayed for us. We might be healed on the faith of others, and we might be blessed by the faith of others, but we cannot be saved or forgiven until WE repent and pray for forgiveness.

We also cannot pass the buck for our own spiritual growth to other people. We cannot pass it to our pastor. I cannot pass it to you. You cannot pass it to me. If you are sinning, you must be the one to repent of that sin, and you must be the one to pray for forgiveness. If you desire to grow in the Lord, you must be the one who gets into His Word and listens for His voice. I cannot do it for you and you cannot do it for me.

The rest of **chapter 8** tells us about Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch. Let's look at that familiar story and then draw some applications for our everyday lives.

**Verses 26-38...**

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Throughout redemptive history, God had poured out His blessings to mankind through the channel of His covenant people. Israel was never meant to be a reservoir that kept accumulating and storing up divine blessings for themselves. They were meant to be a channel or funnel through which God's blessings would be dispersed to a lost world.

But, Israel largely failed in her missions. If we look at the history of Israel, we see two extremes...Israel either totally separated herself religiously and had no contact at all with the Gentile nations around her...

Or Israel was strongly influenced by the idolatry and paganism of the Gentile nations around her.

And because of this...because of Israel's failure to do what God had called and commissioned her to do...God cut a new channel through which His blessings would reach the world...and that channel is known as the church. The church would embrace all races and all nations.

We saw this beginning at Pentecost...where Jews from every nation under heaven were part of what happened that day...but not only would the Holy Spirit draw Jews into the kingdom and Samaritans, who were part Jews...He would also draw Gentiles.

And we see this as Philip presents Jesus Christ to the Ethiopian.

The Ethiopian was seeking truth and I firmly believe  
when a person seeks truth, truly seeks to know God,  
the Lord will send the Gospel to that person.

Don't miss the sovereignty of God and the leadership of the Holy Spirit in all this...

Philip was guided to the Ethiopian by an angel. We're not given the whole conversation here, but Philip must have greeted the Ethiopian and then Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

And the Ethiopian didn't take offense at the question...instead, he said, "How can I unless someone helps me?"

Now, did Philip have to say, "Well, wait right here, and I'll go get my pastor"? Or did he say, "Wait, don't go anywhere, and I'll go get you some books, and some tracts, and a tape that's really good"?

No! Philip was able **verse 35** says to look at that passage in Isaiah and preach Jesus to the Ethiopian. This resulted in the Ethiopian's salvation and baptism.

The Ethiopian **personally** confessed Jesus to Philip and he **publicly** confessed Jesus to his entourage. We're not told there, but a man of his status and position would not have been traveling alone. He would have had plenty of folks with him. The fact that this man went down INTO the water indicates his baptism was by **immersion**.

We've seen this a lot this past week in our own church this week, haven't we?...

believers following Jesus in baptism  
believers getting their baptism on the right side of salvation...  
believers being baptized to identify themselves with a body of believers with like beliefs...  
believers being baptized to show publicly what has happened to them privately...  
believers being baptized as an act of obedience...  
believers being baptized to show a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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May I say to you again, as I've said to you before...

If you've been saved and not baptized, you're living in disobedience, and you're missing a tremendous blessing!

## **Verses 39-40...**

Well, let's draw some applications from today's lesson...

1) God wants His people to be taken care of, and He wants us to be willing to serve others...**and we saw that in the example set by the deacons in chapter 6.**

2) God wants His children to be willing to take a stand for the Gospel...**and we saw that in Stephen's martyrdom.**

(We don't know if things in this wicked world will get that bad in our lifetime, but if they do, would you be able as Stephen did to stand before folks and defend your faith? Would you have the courage? Would you have the conviction?)

3) God is not pleased with folks who say they believe and their lives aren't changed...those who use or attempt to use Christianity and the church and other believers to their own advantage...and we saw that with Simon the sorcerer.

4) God is pleased when we are able to just open the Scriptures and tell others about Jesus as Philip did. Every believer, you and I included, should be able to meet folks at the point of their confusion and tell them enough about Jesus that they can understand it. (We saw Philip doing this with the Ethiopian. Philip was knowledgeable enough in Scripture to meet the Ethiopian where he was and preach Jesus to him. ARE YOU?)

Peter said in **1 Peter 3:15**:

**"...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence..."**

Well, may the dear Holy Spirit enable us to be willing to serve, to be willing to stand for our faith because our faith is not make believe faith, but real faith; and may He give us a hunger and thirst for His Word so we will be able to share the Gospel with the folks God allows into our lives!