

Acts Highlights - Part 3

by George Verwer

The sermon highlights the importance of resolving problems, delegation, and forgiveness in the church, using the examples of Stephen, Philip, and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Duration: 33:58

Scripture: Genesis 12:4, Exodus 2:20, Acts 7:46, Acts 7:59

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the message of Stephen, who emphasizes the guilt of the people before God. Stephen talks about the history of Abraham, Moses, and David, highlighting their importance. The speaker emphasizes the need for flexibility and availability to the leading of the Holy Spirit, even for those with administrative responsibilities in the church. The sermon then shifts to discussing the testimony of Philip, another servant of the Lord who was involved in practical work but also actively shared the gospel. The speaker emphasizes the concept of radical grace and the importance of forgiveness, as demonstrated by Stephen in his final moments.

Transcript

Welcome to each one of you who's been following this series Bible study challenge from the Book of Acts. We're now in part three. We're looking at especially chapters six, seven, and eight.

And of course, in preparation, I've been spending more time in these amazing chapters. These two rather long messages considering the Book of Acts as a whole from Stephen and from Peter. It's always a blessing to hear from anyone that is following this series.

I'm very easy to find. You can just google my name or george.verwer at om.org. I read every email personally. We send out free books to pretty well anyone anywhere, especially part of our lockdown book program.

We're living in days of tremendous upheaval with various protests in different nations. I try to follow most of the nations of the world in intercessory prayer. And I hope you also are managing in your busy schedule to get that time in prayer, which is, of course, one of the strongest messages there in the Book of Acts.

I wanted to start first of all with a brief prayer. And then I want to read a quotation that I actually put in my Bible just before my old Bible, just before the Book of Acts that has ministered to me and helped me many

times. When I didn't feel very spiritual, I didn't feel very refreshed, maybe even battling discouragement.

And that quotation from this man, H.A. Hodges, a great Bible teacher, ministered to me many times. So I'm going to pray. Then I'm going to read that quote.

And then we'll go into the into the Book of Acts together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that your word brings light.

We thank you for how your word guides our path. And we think of the Psalm as challenging us to hide your work in our hearts, that we may not sin against you. And we pray, Lord, that we would not be hearers of the word, but that we would be doers.

Strengthen us as we follow these great men and women in the Book of Acts. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Here's this quotation from H.A. Hodges that I hope will be a challenge to you. Speaking of the initial fervor and excitement we have when we initially come to Christ, which for me was the Billy Graham meeting in New York City way back in March of 1955. And later on, when we go through dry periods, which the enemy can try to confuse us or discourage us.

This quotation has been one of the most important in my life. This fervor is especially characteristic of beginners, and it's drying up should be welcomed as a sign that we are getting beyond the first stage. What a prize to read that when I first read it.

To try to retain it or to long for its return in the midst of dryness is to refuse to grow up. It is to refuse the cross by a steady adherence to God when the affections are dried up. There's nothing left but the naked will clinging blindly to him.

This will help us be set free from self-regard and teach us the way of pure love. H.A. Hodges. Well, immediately as we go into chapter six, we find that there's problems.

It's not possible to have people together and not have problems. Some of you know my little George Verwer proverb, where two or three are gathered together, sooner or later there's a mess, which eventually led me to write my book, Messiology, of how I've seen God work in so many messy situations, including some that I made myself. And here we go into chapter six in the book of Acts.

We see they've got problems. I think it would be good to read the text. But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent.

Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. So the twelve called a meeting of all the believers. We apostles should not spend our time, we apostles should spend our time preaching and teaching the word of God, not administering a food program, they said.

Now look around among you and among your friends and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this business. Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and the teaching of the word.

The idea pleased the whole group, which is quite amazing, not always easy to get unity in a church meeting. It pleased the whole group, and they chose the following. Stephen, a man full of faith and of the

Holy Spirit, Philip, and by the way the next two chapters are about Stephen and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicholas of Antioch, a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith who had now become a Christian.

The two messages we read about or we study in this passage are both aimed at Jewish people, the Hebrew people, otherwise it would not make much sense. But it's interesting that one of the early seven, often referred to as deacons, was actually a Gentile. These seven were presented to the apostles who prayed for them and they laid hands on them.

God's message was preached in ever-widening circles. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted too. Wow, there's so much in that passage about, first of all, resolving a problem, and secondly about delegation, delegating different aspects of the work to different people, and especially having people in the church who can handle administrative challenges.

And these people are very important. Now it's interesting that one of those who is chosen for this practical work of food distribution suddenly becomes sort of the hero of the next two chapters and the first martyr that we read about in the Word of God. So this is to me a message that, though in the church you may have an official responsibility administratively, you still need to be available to how the Holy Spirit may lead you.

Sharing your faith is a clear example of this, and I believe some of the problems we often have in our churches is just the lack of flexibility. We get a certain way of doing things we don't like to change. The Holy Spirit often leads different people in different ways, and certainly the way God led Stephen in this, we read in this passage, is quite unusual.

And of course he was soon arrested. Let's again go back to the Scripture and read what happened picking up at verse 8. Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. This seems to be a contradiction of him being assigned to being a deacon.

But as I've shared, the Holy Spirit often has surprises for anyone, and often there are people, even in our churches, that have actually a range of gifting. And it's always been a mystery to me, looking back at my own pilgrimage, how some people seem to have a wide range of gifts in terms of ministry. I've worked with such people, whereas other people seem to be just more focused on one or two areas of ministry.

I'm for sure in all of this we need to stay free from judgmentalism and to be open to how the Lord leads people and respecting people. It is interesting that these men who were chosen for this sort of practical work very much had strong qualifications, which we already read about in a previous passage, and which is repeated as we talk about Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. But one day, some men of God, of freed slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him.

They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, and Cilicia, and the province of Asia. None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and spirit by which Stephen spoke. So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, we heard him blaspheme Moses and even God.

Naturally, this aroused a crowd, the elders and the teachers of religious law, so they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council. The lying witness said, this man is only speaking against the temple

and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say, this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.

And at this point, everyone in the council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel. We don't have time to go into this tremendous message of Stephen, and he is very strong in bringing out some of the history and showing how these people are guilty before God. He talks about Abraham first, picking it up around verse 4, and gives us a bit of a history of Abraham.

And then he talks about Moses. You pick that up around verse 20, and then he finishes his talk referring to David. You see that in verse 46, David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent temple for the God of Jacob.

I hope as you're studying Acts, you will read that sermon, which of course led to Stephen being martyred. Pick it up at the very end, verse 59. And as they stoned him, Stephen prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And he fell to his knees, shouting, Lord, don't charge them with this sin. And with that, he died. I think if we study a passage too quickly, we often miss one of the most important aspects of the passage.

And for me, that one sentence in which he asked God to forgive these people, which clearly expresses that as he was being martyred, he was forgiving the very people that brought his death. I call this radical grace. Those of you who know me know that this is an important part of my message, because I see it so clearly in the Word of God.

Now in this time of all these demonstrations and protests, we may ask, where does this fit in? And surely the police and the government has a responsibility before God as much as possible to have justice. But Stephen was dying. It would not be his responsibility to enforce justice.

These people should be arrested. They should stand before a court for the murder of this man. Stephen was responsible as he had his last moments to make sure his own heart was right and to express the depth of his conviction about forgiveness and forgiving people.

We have verses that are so strong on this. One saying that if we don't forgive others, then how can we expect God to forgive us? One of the strongest passages in the Bible on the subject of forgiveness. And then the passage about how many times you should forgive.

And of course, it seems to teach unlimited time. Again, this is not replacing justice, but this is bringing in the other side of the coin. And of course, it would be a miracle in Minneapolis, and it probably is happening if they can forgive these police who were responsible for his death.

But that doesn't mean they don't work for justice. That doesn't mean it's totally wrong for people to protest this kind of thing as it seems to be happening too much. And it's a difficult challenge to say the least.

One of my prayers in this crisis is that people will not somehow disrespect the police. There are 900,000 police in the United States. We, of course, know what the Bible says.

No, it's impossible to think that there's not going to be some really bad ones. Many, many people in the world today, whatever country you go to, are gripped by anger. They're gripped by hatred.

And that can happen to a person who's in the police force. That can happen to a demonstrator in the street. And that's why our message of the gospel is really the greatest hope for humankind today.

But of course, we need to get on with the book of Acts. Stephen is martyred. And one of the persons who witnesses, and this is the first mention of the Apostle Paul who was called Saul.

But one of the first mentions of Paul, then called Saul, is right after the martyrdom. Pick it up at chapter eight. Saul was one of the official witnesses at the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem. And all the believers, except the apostles, fled into Judea and Samaria. Some godly people came and buried Stephen with loud weeping.

Paul, again, the first reference to Paul, in this case, of course, it says Saul. Saul was going everywhere to devastate the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into jail.

It's so amazing to think that this Saul became Paul for the power of the living Christ, and one of the great ambassadors in the entire history of the church, giving us also some of the great epistles, some of them written even when he was in prison. In my lecture number four, of course, we'll be getting to chapter nine, and we'll be speaking about the conversion of the apostle Paul. But here in chapter eight, we have this picture of the persecution of the believers.

The church in Antioch, which we look at later in chapter 13, only was born because of the persecution. And it's amazing that this young church in Antioch, as we'll see later, became one of the great mission sending churches of the day, one of the very first. As they had that prayer meeting, and the Holy Spirit said, separate Paul and Barnabas to the work for which I have called them.

But we need to move on in chapter eight now and read about Philip and the amazing testimony of this servant of the Lord, who was also named as one of the practical workers, one of the deacons. So we don't get a picture of him administering and doing practical work. We get a picture of him out sharing the gospel.

Let's pick it up there in chapter eight of verse four. But the believers who had fled Jerusalem went everywhere preaching the good news about Jesus. What a brief, challenging word for all of our hearts, that wherever we go, for whatever reason, persecution, change of job, pandemic, wherever we go, we should attempt to share the Lord Jesus along the way.

And I know in my own life, many of the great opportunities I've had to share have been on buses or trains or airplanes, traveling from one place to another. And it's the challenge, isn't it, to buy up the time in sharing the message of Jesus. And again, these three chapters just reaffirm what we've been trying to say, that our main responsibility is to spread the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and to share the great message of salvation.

And I hope each one of you, by God's grace, the power of the Holy Spirit, though it may be like me in much weakness, are sharing your faith. And then, of course, we have Philip meeting up with the Ethiopian eunuch. But I think just before that, it's good to read a little bit about Simon.

There's a tremendous lesson through Simon. He believed, verse 13, Simon himself believed and was baptized. So we've got Philip discipling Simon, who seems to have a lot of potential.

This also brings us to, unfortunately, another controversy, is when we should baptize people. And in this passage and in the Philip, the passage with the Ethiopian eunuch, clearly, as soon as the person professed faith, they baptized him. Someone recently wrote me and said they just went to a church where when the man gave an invitation for people to accept Jesus, and those who accepted Jesus that Sunday were immediately baptized.

So there are churches today that practice this. It does seem, however, that the church in the early days, these are very early days, learned that oftentimes people make a profession, but there doesn't seem to be a real transformation of their lives. So generally today, churches wait for a while to see what's really happening and have some teaching in the Word of God to see if the person really understands what is happening in his or her life.

And, of course, we can understand this if we read the rest of this passage. When the apostles back in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God's message, they sent Peter and John. So now Peter and John come into the picture.

As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new Christians to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not come upon any of them, for they'd only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Well, here we have another controversy. Are there some who are believers but do not have the Holy Spirit? I can only say this is the birth of the church. These are the beginning days.

And to fully grasp how the Holy Spirit was working, I think, is difficult. And, of course, this is part of the theme of my book, Messialogy, how God seems to work in different people and in different churches in different ways. And I feel that so much of the controversy about the Holy Spirit is unnecessary.

I remember Billy Graham, in speaking about the reality and the fullness of the Spirit, said, I don't care how you get it, just get it. And it's important to grasp this. I think it's clear in history that some people, at their conversion, having very dynamic transformational experiences, which is true in my life, didn't mean I didn't have a long way to go.

Other people, not much happens after their initial profession of faith. And later on, they have an experience. Sometimes they may call it the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes they may even refer to this passage. But in the end, God does work in different people in different ways. But here's the lesson that we must not miss in this passage.

When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given, when the apostles placed their hands upon the people's heads, he offered money to buy this power. Let me have this power, he exclaimed. When I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter, of course, had a very strong reply. Peter replied, may your money perish with you, for thinking God's gift can be bought. You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God.

But we just read a moment ago that he believed, and he was being discipled by Philip. So this is a tough experience. And it's happened to me many, many times.

People that I put confidence in, I gave time to, but then after a season, they turned away. Only in a few cases even turned against me or against the church. So it's just a challenge that in God's work, especially in leadership, we need a lot of wisdom.

And we need to keep our eyes open for Simons. People who may look like they're doing all right, they may have some nice words, but their hearts are not right. Their hearts are not right.

And of course, this is probably one of the reasons that in the church people are not just baptized immediately. But it's a bit of a mystery because the very next story of the course is about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. We don't have time to read the whole passage, but it begins at verse 26.

And I want to read from verse 28. He was now returning seated on his carriage. He was reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit said to Philip, go over and walk along beside the carriage. Philip ran over and heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. He asked, do you understand what you are reading? The man replied, how can I when there's no one to instruct me? Interesting, isn't it? And he begged Philip to come up under the carriage and sit with him.

The passage of scripture that he'd been reading was this. He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb is silent before the sheriff. And yet he did not open his mouth.

He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants for his life was taken from earth? The eunuch asked Philip, was Isaiah talking about himself or someone else? So Philip began with the same scripture and then used many others to tell him the good news about Jesus. As they rolled along, they came to some water and the eunuch said, look, there's some water.

Why can I not be baptized? He ordered the carriage to stop. They went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord caught Philip away.

The eunuch never saw him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip found himself further north in the city of Azotus. He preached the good news there and in every city along the way until he came to Caesarea.

What a challenge. What a challenge concerning personal evangelism. What a challenging connection with the unusual ways that God works.

What a challenge when we think of being available, being available to the Holy Spirit in terms of being ready to give ourselves to some individual who has questions, who is searching. There are people today who are searching and even in these days in which people have not been able to go to church, a huge amount of ministry has gone out through the internet and it has shown that there are more people out there asking questions and searching than we perhaps realized, who are reticent to walk into a church building. This is why a lot of the great outreach in all of history takes place outside of church buildings.

That doesn't mean people don't come to Christ in churches, like many different subjects, some of which become controversial. It's not either or. Is our ministry mainly in the church or is it mainly in the streets and

the houses and wherever people are? It's obviously both and God leads different people in different ministries in different ways.

I've just written the forward to a book about the Open Air Campaigners, an amazing movement born in Australia in which they specialize in speaking in the street and when I first arrived at Chicago at Moody Bible Institute, I heard about them and immediately joined them. Amazing meeting because that's when I met Dick Griffin in the streets of Chicago and we became long-standing friends and I turned the work in Mexico over to him when I left for Spain in 1960. Other people are led to share the gospel in other ways and especially now through the internet.

I remember one brother on OM who was an accountant who was very shy. God was using him in his accounting and legal skills but under pressure he tried to minister in the open air. He found it extremely difficult and he wrote me.

He was older than me and shared how he didn't feel God was calling him to preach in the street but to work behind the scenes and I honored that and he became one of the long-standing servants of the Lord. Again, very similar to what we read in the beginning of chapter 6 about some people being assigned to the practical work. The church today is much bigger.

It's much more complex. We cannot expect it to return to the simplicity of those early days and we see that even in the early days there wasn't perhaps as much simplicity as people might like to say. They already had their problems and the difficulties and situations like Simon.

So there's a lot to learn from these three chapters and I hope you will definitely give time to review them again. God bless you as you continue in your study of the book of Acts. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for the lessons from these three chapters. We thank you for the life of Philip. We thank you for the life of Stephen willing to go all the way even to being a martyr and yet the radical forgiveness that he expressed at his moment of dying and surely in extreme pain as he was actually stoned to death.

We thank you for your servant Philip and his availability to the Holy Spirit and the way you used him to bring that unusual man from Ethiopia which some people believe led to the great growth of the church in Ethiopia which is a strong church even to this day. Lord, we stand amazed at the variety of the ways that you work. We stand amazed at the unique significant ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We look forward to reading about the Apostle Paul who we see was such a great persecutor of the church and how somehow he experienced your transforming grace and Lord I pray if there's anyone that somehow got involved in this study with us that doesn't yet know you in a personal way that this will be their moment of decision, their moment of salvation as they believe upon you just as that Ethiopian did in the chariot being impacted so much that he wanted to be immediately baptized. We worship you as we receive the inspiration of this great passage in Jesus' name. Amen.

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