

Our **GUIDE** for little ones

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IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

Lesson 64

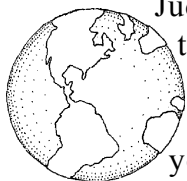
The First Deacons

Acts 6

One of the most amazing things about the early Christian church was how it *grew*.

Do you remember how big it was when it *started*? About 120. In the whole wide world, that's all there was.

Jesus, however, had told His disciples that they must preach the gospel. Not only in Jerusalem, but in all of Judea ... and in Samaria ... and to the ends of the earth.



Suppose that someone had asked the disciples, How are you going to *do* that? Where will you go? What if the number of believers gets *big*? Who, then, will be the *leaders*? Who will do the *work* of the church?

Now, think: How would the disciples have answered those questions?

Most likely they would have said, “We don’t have any idea! It seems to us ... *impossible!* All we can do is keep on preaching — and see where the *Lord* leads us.”

And that’s what they did, too. They kept on preaching. And the Lord used that preaching — powerfully. Soon the number of believers was 3,000! Then 5,000. Then about 20,000. And then the Lord started showing them the answers to those questions. Let’s see what those answers were.

First of all, what about the question, “Who is going to do the work of the

Note to Parents: These papers are intended for the younger Sunday School students — grade 3 and below. Vocabulary and concepts are such that children in this age group, even the 3rd graders, will profit most if the stories are read *to* them, not *by* them. Most lessons have two stories, for two sittings if that proves to be beneficial. Our hope is that parents will find these lessons to be useful tools in the teaching of Bible stories and Bible truths to their children in the “off” season.

church?” The apostles, the *twelve*, were doing ... *everything*. Can you imagine that? 20,000 people in the church, and the apostles were doing all of the preaching and the teaching. They visited the sick. And they took care of the church’s poor. The apostles knew that all those were things that the church *must* do. So they tried very hard ... to do it all.

Then something happened to show them that they couldn’t do it all. Some people came to the apostles and complained. They complained that some of the widows of the church were being “neglected.” The widows in those days, you see, were usually *poor*. And the apostles tried to see to it that, every day, the widows had enough food to eat. And they *missed* some. Not purposely. The church was just getting too *big*. The apostles, by themselves, couldn’t keep track of everything. They had *missed* some widows. They felt bad about that.



They saw that there was a *problem* — a problem that had to be *fixed*. The church needed more *workers*. Really, different *kinds* of workers. The church needed *preachers*, of course, but it needed also to have men who would take care of the poor. These men would collect money. They would buy food. They would distribute the food to the poor. That would be their *work*.

Now, who may do this work? May the work of the church be done by *anybody who wants to* — anyone who wants to help out and has a little extra time to

do it? No, that isn’t true. The work of the church must be done by those who are *specially appointed* by the church to a special work. And, second, those who are appointed by the church must be *spiritually fit* for the work. They must have the spiritual *gifts* to do the special work.

Listen closely, now, to see if you can hear those two things, in what the apostles *did*. They called together all of the believers, and they explained to them the problem — the problem that they, the apostles, were spending much time *distributing food* — when they should instead be spending more time *preaching* and *teaching*. So, the apostles said, you (the church) should pick out seven men who are *full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*, and then we will *appoint them* to take charge of caring for the poor.

The multitude of believers *liked* that. They saw that it was wise. They chose seven men and set them before the apostles. The apostles prayed, and then laid their hands on them. Thus did these seven men become the New Testament church’s first *deacons*. A new “office” was started in the church at that moment. Ever after that, the church has had deacons. Your church, today, has deacons — all because some widows in the Jerusalem church 2,000 years ago were missed in the daily distribution.



How Well Did You Listen?

1. How many people were in the New

Testament church at the very beginning?

2. Who were doing all of the work of the church at the beginning?

3. What did some people complain to the apostles about?

4. How many men were appointed to care for the poor? What are these men called?

The First Martyr

Acts 7:1 - 8:8

One of the first seven deacons was a man by the name of Stephen. As long as this old world lasts, Stephen will be *remembered* — not so much for how he *lived*, as for how he *died*. Stephen, you see, was the first one in the New Testament church to be *killed* ... for Jesus' sake. In our story for today we will find out how that happened.

As the seven deacons went about their work of helping the poor, the unbelieving Jews hardly even noticed them. Except for Stephen. The enemies of Christ and His church could not *help* but notice *Stephen*. The Bible tells us that Stephen was full of faith and power. Power to do *miracles*. *Great* miracles — in the *name of Jesus*.

But that wasn't all. It wasn't just what Stephen *did*. It was what he *said*. He talked to the people about the *Bible*. He talked to them about the Old Testament *pictures*. He pointed them to the *temple*, to the *sacrifices*, to the *ceremonies* of the *law* because all of those things were about ... *Jesus*.

Let's see if we can understand that. The temple, sacrifices, priests, lambs, blood, and Moses — all of these, in Old Testament times, were very important. Moses was the great lawgiver. The laws told the people of Israel how to worship *God*. Priests had to bring *sacrifices* to God. *Lambs* had to be killed. *Blood* had to be shed. And all of this had to be done in the *temple* — the only building in the whole world that could be called the *house of God*.

That was the Jews' *religion*. That had *been* their religion for *hundreds of years*.

Now, can you imagine what they would think when someone comes along and says, "We don't need any of that anymore"? Blasphemy! That's what they would think. Blasphemy against *Moses*. Blasphemy against the *law*. Blasphemy against the *temple*.

Truth is, even the Jewish *Christians* had a hard time getting used to that. Can it really be true that all of those things were only ... *pictures*? They all seemed so *real*. And so *important*. It was hard to imagine a religious life ... *without the laws of Moses!* And without the *temple!*

Stephen *understood* all of that, maybe better than anyone else. And he *taught* it. He taught that all of those Old Testament pictures were *fulfilled* by Jesus. Yes, Jesus was the *Great High Priest*. He brought to God a *sacrifice* that really paid for sins. He brought *Himself*. He was the *Lamb of God*. His

blood was shed. The sins of His people were now *fully paid for*. No need, therefore, to kill even *one more lamb*.

To the people of God, the teaching of Stephen would be like *music to their ears*. Not so, to the unbelieving Jews. How dare this man Stephen *attack their religion*? They will *fix* him. Some of them decided to *debate him*. They would argue against him, *in public*, and show everybody that he was *wrong*.

But it didn't work. They found that Stephen knew the Bible a whole lot better than *they* did. They were *embarrassed*, and *angry*. Unable to prove him wrong, they will *get rid of him for good*. They stirred up the people. They stirred up the elders and the scribes. They tried to get everybody angry at Stephen. And then they brought him before the *Sanhedrin*.

What are the charges against him? That he blasphemes the temple. That he blasphemes Moses' law. We heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will *destroy the temple*.

But it was a *lie*. And they *knew* it. What Stephen had *really* taught was that Jesus *fulfilled* the Old Testament laws and pictures. All those pictures were *about Him*. Jesus actually *did* what all of those pictures pointed to. That's not *blasphemy*. That's *good news!* That's the *gospel!*

Blasphemy is a sin worthy of *death*. The Sanhedrin must decide. Does Stephen speak the *truth*? Or is he a *blasphemer*?

Before Stephen said a word, the Sanhedrin got their answer. His *face!* It *shone!* Yes, so filled with the Spirit was Stephen that his face glowed with a supernatural light. It shone ... like the face of an *angel*.

The wicked men in this room, however, go right ahead with their *trial*. The high priest demands that Stephen speak. "Are these things



so?" he asks. And then Stephen, filled with the Spirit, does speak. He shows the Sanhedrin what the Bible, the Scriptures, the Word of God, says about Moses and the law, and about the temple. He reminds them, too, of how their fathers had always persecuted the messengers of God who had prophesied about the coming of the Christ. Their fathers were a stiffnecked people. And you, Stephen said, are just like them. You have murdered the promised Messiah.

Does Stephen's face still shine, like an angel's? Probably so. But who cares? The Sanhedrin is filled with fury. They gnash their teeth at Stephen.

And then something wonderful happened. For a brief moment, God *opened heaven* to the eyes of this faithful witness. Looking up, Stephen saw the *glory of God* ... and *Jesus*, standing at the right hand of God. The place of *power*. All things are in *His hand*. Stephen need fear *nothing*. His Lord is *watching*. And *working*. Working everything for good — for His church, for Stephen. Even in death!

The Sanhedrin saw nothing of heaven. But Stephen told them. “Behold,” he said, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

The very *thought* of it filled the Sanhedrin with *fury*. They will not hear another word from this man. They jump up. They cover their ears. They yell at the top of their lungs.

They rush toward Stephen. They drag him out of the building. And out of the city. They will stone him to death.

Yes, they will *kill* him. So much do they hate ... Jesus. Oh, they hate Stephen too — but only because of what he says about *Jesus of Nazareth*. They will shut Stephen up. Shut him up for good. The false witnesses took off their coats, laid them, for safe-

keeping, at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul, and then picked up the rocks they will need to snuff out the life of this man who reminds them so much of ... *Jesus*.

Once more, before he dies, Stephen reminds them of Jesus. “Lord Jesus,” Stephen said, “receive my spirit.” Ah, yes, that will be *his* end. The enemy may think that *they* have the victory. But they don’t. Stephen knows it. He had seen Jesus ... standing ... at God’s right hand. The power is His. He *wills* this. In just a moment Stephen will be ... where Jesus is. “Lord, lay not this sin to

their charge.” Those were Stephen’s last words. Having said that, he “fell asleep.”

Saul, the Bible tells us, was *consenting unto his death*. That means that he *agreed* with it. He didn’t throw any stones, but he was sure that Stephen *deserved to die*.

After Stephen’s death, Saul went after other followers of Jesus. He went right into their *houses* and hauled them away to prison. So fierce did the persecution of Christians become, that many of them fled from the city of Jerusalem to escape from Saul.

And wherever they went, the Christians told other people about ... Jesus. Think hard about that. What was Saul trying to do? He was trying as hard as he could to *destroy* the church of Christ. But what really happened? Exactly the opposite. Those who fled from Jerusalem brought with them the *gospel*, the good news of salvation in Jesus — all over Judea and Samaria. Nobody could stop it. Because Jesus stands ... at the right hand of God.



How Well Did You Listen?

1. Why did the enemies of the church very soon notice the deacon Stephen?
2. What did the Sanhedrin see when they looked at Stephen?
3. What did Stephen tell the Sanhedrin that he saw when he looked up to heaven?

4. What did the Sanhedrin do to try to shut out Stephen's words?
5. At whose feet did the witnesses put their coats?

4. What proof did the Sanhedrin have, right at the beginning, that Stephen was a man of God?
5. How did that persecution actually help the church *grow*?

How Well Do You Understand?

1. How did the apostles learn that the church of Christ needed deacons?
2. According to the apostles, what kind of men must deacons be?
3. Why were the enemies of Stephen embarrassed and angry after they argued with him?

Memory Verse

Acts 7:56b "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God."

Follow the Dots

Where did the gospel spread?

Follow the dots to draw a map of some of the land around Jerusalem and color it light brown.

Color the water blue.

