

## LESSON 4

### THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

#### CHAPTERS 6-10

---

**Why 7 men were chosen? Historical context**

**Who is Stephen?**

**Expansion of the Church**

**Philip's Gentile Mission**

**Who is Saul? His Conversion – the historical, political and theological significance of Saul and Paul**

**Cornelius, the Roman Centurion**

---

**(Acts 6: 1-7) Why 7 men were chosen? What is the historical context for their presence in the bible?**

**Problems in the church:** Although the early church was a model church of prayer and fellowship, it also had internal problems like many of our churches. Let us have a realistic perspective: perfection does not exist. Life is full of imperfections and imperfect people and in the midst of imperfections, how well we live is an art and challenge. All churches have problems. A church does not have to be perfect to be faithful

**What is the internal problem in the early church?** The Hebraic Jews, native Jewish Christians spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language. The Grecian Jews, Greek speaking Christians and others spoke Greek. The Greek speaking Christians complained that their widows were being unfairly treated by Hebraic Jews. The favoritism was not probably intentional but was more likely caused by the language barrier. To correct the situation, the apostles put seven Greek speaking men in charge of the food distribution program. This solved the problem and allowed the apostles to keep their focus on teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus.

As the early church increased in size, so did its needs. One great need was to organize the distribution of the food to the poor. The apostles need to focus on preaching and so they chose others to administer the food program. Each one has a vital part to play in the early church. There are different kinds of people with different gifts in the early church like our body consists of different parts with different function at the same time (1Cor 12:4-11).

**6:3 Leadership is a responsible and holy commitment in love and sincerity.** Let us not take it lightly. If we are in a position of leadership and find ourselves overwhelmed by

responsibilities, we have to look for help. The leaders cannot lose their souls for the sake of saving others' souls. There are people with great talents who are not in leadership position and they can be approached and the people without leadership have to share their gifts for God and His church's life and mission. People who carry church responsibilities or willing to offer their service to church ministries should be spiritually mature and wise men and women to lead our churches. (Discussion on employees who are at the parish ministries)

Being an administrator is a very important responsibility and it should not be taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program 6:5-6 *The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man **filled with faith and the holy Spirit**, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.*

**6:4 Priorities of the apostles:** The apostles' priorities were correct. The ministry of the word should never be neglected because of the administrative burdens. Pastors should not try to do everything (micromanagement for corporation companies only) and people should not expect their pastors to do everything. The church ministry is a shared responsibility and everyone has a role to play as various members of one body for proper functioning. Without bible knowledge, we cannot give Christ and defend our faith.

**6:5-6 Spiritual leadership is a serious business** and must not be taken lightly by the church or its leaders. In the early church, the chosen men were ordained and commissioned (set apart by prayer and laying on of hands) by the apostles. Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person for special service (Num 27:23/Deut 34:9)

**6:7 Power of the word of God:** The word of God spread like ripples on a pond where from a single center, each wave touches the next, spreading wider and farther. The gospel still spreads this way today. Wherever the word of God spread, the church grew. (Refer Acts 12:24/19:20)

**6:8 – 7:60 Who is Stephen?** He is the first Christian martyr for his faith in Christ, outstanding leader, teachers and debater. He was named among the managers of food distribution in the early church. Long before violent persecution broke out against Christians, there was already social ostracism. Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah were usually cut off from their families. As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of home and food was both a practical and necessary mark of the early church. Eventually the number of believers made it necessary to organize the sharing. They needed men with integrity, wisdom and sensitivity for this job. Stephen besides being a good administrator was also a powerful speaker. Stephen launched into a long speech about Israel's relationship with God. He reviewed the faithfulness of God and his sovereignty. From OT history he showed that the Jews had constantly rejected God's message and his prophets and that this council rejected the Messiah, God's Son. He clearly exposed the

hypocritical attitude of the temple authorities. He was confronted by the temple authorities who cannot stand before his logic and wisdom. He defended his case before the council. They could not stand before his wisdom so they silenced his voice by stoning him to death. They falsely accused him of going against Moses' teaching. He prayed for the killers like Jesus and that shows how Jesus transformed him to imbibe him in persecution.

### **10 Comparisons between Jesus Christ and Stephen the first martyr**

None could not resist their wisdom nor answer their arguments (Acts 6:10 (and) Matt. 13:54)

Both had false witnesses against them (Acts 6:11 (and) Matt. 26:59)

The Pharisees stirred up the people against them (Acts 6:12 (and) Matt. 27:20)

Both were brought before the council (Acts 6:12 (and) Matt. 26:59)

Both were accused of blasphemy (Acts 6:13 (and) Matt. 26:65)

Both were accused of not keeping the law (Acts 6:13 (and) Matt. 12:2)

Both had association with high priests (Acts 7:1 (and) Matt. 26:3)

Stephen dealt with the same people Jesus did (Acts 7:1 (and) Matt. 26:57)

Both prayed for God to forgive their killers (Acts 7:60 (and) Luke 23:34)

Devout men buried both Jesus and Stephen (Acts 8:2 (and) Matt. 27:59)

**8: 1-8 Expansion of the Church:** Persecution forced the Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria- thus fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command (Acts 1:8). The persecution helped the spread of the gospel and God would bring great results from the believers' suffering. The apostles died as martyrs. Christ suffered. The apostles suffered and the early Christians suffered for their faith in Christ. Christianity became a triumphant religion through blood and tribulation. Persecution is a part of being a Christian. Persecution allows us to have a fellowship with Jesus. Persecution strengthens the believers. When we remain faithful to God, we must expect persecution. God seems to have a special reward for those who endure such persecution.

**8:9-25 Simon the sorcerer:** In the days of the early church, sorcerers and magicians were numerous and influential. They worked wonders, performed healings and exorcisms and practiced astrology. Their wonders may have been magic tricks, or the sorcerers may have been empowered by Satan (Mt 24:24/ 2 Thes 2:9) Simon had done so many wonders that some even thought that he was the Messiah but his powers did not come from God (Acts 8:12-24).

Peter and John were sent to Samaria to find out whether or not the Samaritans were truly becoming believers. The Jewish Christians and the apostles were not sure whether Gentiles and the half Jews could receive the Holy Spirit. The same John in the gospel is nicknamed as the son of thunder for his attitude towards the Samaritans. He asked Jesus if they should call fire down from down to burn up the Samaritan village that refused to welcome them

(Luke 9:51-55). Here he and Peter were sent to pray with them. It is truly an attitudinal change after they received the Holy Spirit, the bringer of unity and universality. The gospel spread among the Samaritans and when Peter and John saw the Lord working in these people, they were assured that the Holy Spirit worked through all believers – Gentiles, Samaritans and Jews. Seeing the power of the Holy Spirit, Simon thought that he could buy the Holy Spirit's power. Simon's attitude shows the mindset of the world "everything has a price" in our world of bribes, wealth and materialism but Peter harshly rebuked him. The only way to receive God's power is to do what Peter told Simon to do – to turn from sin and ask God for forgiveness and be filled with his Spirit. No amount of money can buy one's salvation, forgiveness of sin or God's power. These are only gained by repentance and belief in Christ as Savior.

What an exemplary lesson from Simon! He was rebuked and confronted by Peter. A normal reaction would be retaliation or a defensive mechanism but Simon amazes us by surrendering, "pray to the Lord for me". If we are rebuked or confronted for our serious mistake, it is for our own good. Admit your error. Repent quickly and ask for prayer.

**8: 26-40 Philip:** who is he? He was one of the deacons in charge of food distribution and left Jerusalem and spread the gospel wherever he went. Unlike others, he did not limit his ministry to Jerusalem Jews alone. He went directly to Samaria, the last place many Jews would go, due to age-old prejudice. The Samaritans responded to Philip in large numbers. When word got back to Jerusalem, Peter and John were sent to evaluate Philip's ministry. In the middle of his successful ministry in Samaria, God directed Philip out to desert for an appointment with an Ethiopian Eunuch, another foreigner who had been in Jerusalem. Philip went immediately. Ethiopia was opened for the gospel. Ethiopia was located in Africa, South of Egypt. The Jews had contact with Ethiopia (known as Cush also) in ancient day (Psalm 68:31) so this man may have been a convert to Judaism. Because he was in charge of treasury of Ethiopia, this man's conversion brought Christianity into the power structures of another government. Philip found the Ethiopian man reading the book of Isaiah from the Scripture. Taking advantage of this opportunity to explain the gospel, Philip asked the man if he understood what he was reading. Philip followed the Spirit's leading and began discussion from where the man was and he explained how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies at the request of Ethiopian eunuch. When we have trouble understanding the Bible, we should ask the ones who love and know the Scripture to help us. We must never let our insecurity or pride get in the way of understanding God's Word. Regarding the bible knowledge, the pastors and the people in Christian churches is way ahead of us. We should have the humility to accept our ignorance and learn from them as long as they don't contradict the Bible teaching. Many preachers and people have a tendency to criticize the Catholics in this regard. Just ignore them. The Bible is supposed to heal and cure the

wounds and it should never be used to argument and create division among us. “Ignorance of the Bible is an Ignorance of Christ” – St. Jerome.

**6:30 The relevance of the OT for understanding the NT:** some think that the OT is not relevant today but Philip led this man to faith in Jesus Christ by using the OT. Jesus is the center of the entire scripture. In the OT, NT is hidden. In the NT, OT is evident. Jesus is found in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Philip led the man to faith in Jesus Christ by using the OT. God’s entire word is applicable to all people in all ages. Let us neither avoid nor neglect the OT which is too God’s word. Here comes the role of the priests who are called, committed and expound the Bible teaching in their homilies. Philip was baptized as a sign of his identification with Christ and the community. Philip disappeared immediately after baptizing the eunuch. He was transported to another city. It shows the urgency of bringing the Gentiles back to belief in Christ.

## **ST. PAUL, THE MIND OF JESUS AND THE PILLAR OF THE CHURCH**

**Acts 9:1-31 Who is Paul?** No person apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul. He preached for Christ throughout Roman Empire on three missionary journeys. He wrote letters to various churches which became part of the NT. Born in Tarsus but became a world traveler for Christ. He was a trained Pharisee, learned the trade of tent making and served as a missionary. His story is told in Acts 7:58-28:31) and throughout his NT letters. Paul was very religious. His training under Gamaliel was a great stroke in his Jewishness. His intentions and efforts were sincere. He was a good Pharisee who knew the Bible and sincerely believed that this Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism. Thus Paul hated the Christian faith and persecuted Christians without mercy. Paul got permission to travel to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But God stopped him in his hurried tracks on the Damascus road. He personally met Jesus and afterwards his life was never the same again. Until Paul’s conversion, little had been done about carrying the gospel to non Jews. The thorny issue of whether Gentile believers had to obey Jewish law before they could become Christians caused many problems in the early church. Paul worked hard to convince the Jews that gentiles were acceptable to God. He spent even more time convincing the Gentiles that they were acceptable to God. God did not waste any part of Paul – his background, his training, his citizenship, his mind or even his weaknesses. We will never know how much and how well He can use us for His people if we allow Him to activate us. Saul (later called Paul) was zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against anyone who believed in Christ. Who were known as the Way. This term needs an explanation before we speak about the conversion of St. Paul

**Initial names of Christians** The early Christians were known as the *Way, the Nazoreans and the Sect* before they were known and called *Christians*

***Way:*** Act 9:2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Act 19:9/ 19:23 /24:14/ 24:22)

***Nazoreans:*** Act 24:5 For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

***Sect:*** Act 28:22 but we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.” Act 24:14 But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, Act 24:5 For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

***Christians*** Acts 11:26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Act 26:28 /1Pe 4:16)

### **Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as far as Damascus?**

There are several possibilities. (1) to seize the Christians who had fled (2) to prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities (3) to keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome. As Saul travelled to Damascus, pursuing Christians, he was confronted by the Risen Christ and he saw Jesus face to face. God breaks into a life in a spectacular manner and sometimes conversion is a quiet experience.

**Conversion of Saul:** Damascus, a commercial city, was located about 175 miles northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. The idea of stamping out Christianity in Damascus by Saul was to prevent the spread of Christianity to other places especially in Rome. This experience for Saul was the start of his new life in Christ (1 Cor 9:1/ 15:8 Gal 1:11-16) Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself

Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord and confessed his sin and surrendered his life to Christ and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to new life in relationship with him. What followed after his encounter with Risen Christ was one of the most dramatic conversions in church history. Saul of Tarsus became the apostle Paul, an ardent missionary to an unbelieving world and a fine

example of faithful service in the face of fierce persecution (Acts 14:19; 16:22–24; 2 Corinthians 11:25–26). Saul's education, his background as a Pharisee, his Roman citizenship, and his unflagging zeal all contributed to his success as a missionary. Saul thought he was pursuing heretics but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers is also guilty of persecuting Jesus because believers are the body of Christ on earth. Mt 20: 40 *And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'* 45 *He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'* Jesus identifies himself with the church. That explains the church's loyalty to Christ and his teaching. Catholic church is being attacked by liberals for our stand on faith and morals. They ask us, 'who are you and who gave you authority to teach'. Jesus gave authority to the church to teach whatever he taught before his ascension: Mt 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age". This verse stands for the church's teaching authority to the world in matters of faith and moral no matter how much rejection she may have to face both within and outside. Mt 16:18-19 I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you *the keys to the kingdom of heaven.* Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Key is a symbol of authority.

**Ananias:** Saul is directed to Ananias for discernment and guidance. In our life journey, we need spiritual people to guide us and discern God's plans for our life. Ananias found Saul and greeted him lovingly as 'Brother Saul'. It is not always easy to show love to others especially when we are afraid of them or doubt their motives. Saul was a known persecutor to everyone. However Ananias obeyed Jesus and accommodated Saul lovingly.

**Saul, a Chosen Instrument of God:** we are called to be God's instruments of His grace, healing, compassion and kindness to everyone and everywhere no matter how hostile people and environment could be. After receiving his sight and spending some time with the believers in Damascus, Saul went to synagogue to tell the Jews about Jesus Christ. A spiritual and pastoral insight we find here in Saul. Saul took some time alone to learn about Jesus before beginning his worldwide ministry. Sometimes we hear new believers showing interest in their faith. While welcoming them warmly, we have to make sure that they are thoroughly grounded in their faith.

Many adults entering the Catholic Church, or those just thinking about it, follow a process known as the RCIA – the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

The RCIA process has several distinct stages, a good model of faith development itself

**Inquiry:** the initial period before deciding to enter the Catholic Church.

**Catechumenate:** those who decide to enter the Church and are being trained for a life in Christ are called catechumens, an ancient name from the early Church. In this stage, they develop their faith and are being “catechized” – learning catechism, or the basic points about Catholic faith and life.

**Purification and preparation:** The Church will help them focus and intensify their faith to commit their life to Christ and be received into the Church at Easter.

**Reception of Sacraments:** They are received into the Church during the Easter Vigil Mass, where they will receive the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist.

**Mystagogy:** after reception into the Church at Easter, this period lets them reflect and learn more about the mysteries of the Mass and the Sacraments that they now participate in fully

**Why Paul went Arabia?** According to Galatians 1:17, 18 Paul left Damascus and travelled to Arabia, the desert region, southeast of Damascus where he lived for three years and returned to Damascus. Many biblical commentators say that he went to Arabia to spend time alone with God and to let the Jewish authorities cool down. When he returned to Jerusalem, he wanted to join the disciples who were still afraid of him as they saw his other side three years back. When they hesitated to accept him in their company, Barnabas became the bridge between Saul and the apostles. Barnabas was Saul’s sponsor or God Father to come along, introduce, encourage, teach and introduce him to the apostles and other believers. How you can become a Barnabas in your parish. Find ways.

**Saul and Paul:** Saul’s name was also Paul. The custom of dual names was common in those days. Acts 13:9 describes the apostle as “Saul, who was also called Paul.” From that verse on, Saul is always referred to in Scripture as “Paul.” Paul was a Jew, born in the Roman city of Tarsus. He was proud of his Jewish heritage, as he describes in Philippians 3:5: “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee.” So zealous and devout was he that persecuting Christians was the natural way for him to show his devotion. He chose to use his Hebrew name, Saul, until sometime after he began to believe in and preach Christ. After that time, as “the apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13), he used his Roman name, Paul. It would make sense for Paul to use his Roman name as he traveled farther and farther into the Gentile world.

It is interesting that Paul began using his Roman name on Cyprus when the Roman proconsul on that island was converted (Acts 13:12). This was during Paul’s first missionary journey and involved a high-ranking, idolatrous Gentile coming to faith in Christ. The fact that the proconsul’s name was Sergius Paulus has led some to think that Saul took the name



Paulus/Paul as a reminder of this event, but the apostle's name being the same as the proconsul's is most likely a coincidence.

Using his Roman name was fitting for the man who proclaimed that he would become "all things to all people," a Jew to the Jews in order to win the Jews, weak to the weak in order to win the weak, etc., all for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Adopting his Roman name would allow Paul to approach the Gentiles to whom he was sent and speak to them in their own language, becoming as one of them and setting them at ease. It is also possible that Paul gave up the use of his Hebrew name, Saul, with its regal connotation and chose to use his Roman name, Paul, meaning "little" or "small," because he desired to become smaller in order to present Christ as greater (cf. John 3:30). Unlike the changing of Simon's name to Peter (Matthew 16:18–19), which Jesus did for a specific purpose, there is no reference in the Bible to Jesus' changing Saul's name to Paul.

**9:32 Who are the saints?** The word "saint" comes from the Greek word *hagios*, which means "consecrated to God, holy, sacred, pious." It is almost always used in the plural, "saints." "...Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to your saints at Jerusalem" (Acts 9:13). "Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda" (Acts 9:32). "And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons ..." (Acts 26:10). There is only one instance of the singular use, and that is "Greet every saint in Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 4:21). In Scripture there are 67 uses of the plural "saints" compared to only one use of the singular word "saint." Even in that one instance, a plurality of saints is in view: "...every saint..." (Philippians 4:21).

The idea of the word "saints" is a group of people set apart for the Lord and His kingdom. Therefore, scripturally speaking, the "saints" are the body of Christ, Christians, the church. All Christians are considered saints. All Christians are saints—and at the same time are called to be saints. Christians are saints by virtue of their connection with Jesus Christ. Christians are called to be saints, to increasingly allow their daily life to more closely match their position in Christ. This is the biblical description and calling of the saints.

**Acts 10 Cornelius:** Who is he? He was a Roman centurion, a gentile. Because Romans controlled Israel and violence broke frequently, Roman soldiers had to be stationed to keep peace throughout Israel. As an army officer, Cornelius represented Rome but his home was in Caesarea. During his years in Israel, he had himself been conquered by the God of Israel. He had a reputation as a godly man who put his faith into action and he was respected by the Jews

Four significant aspects of Cornelius character are noted in Acts. He actively sought God, revered God, generous in meeting other people's needs and he prayed. He had a vision of God because of his sincere faith. his prayers and generous giving were a memorial offering to the Lord.

**Food laws:** According to Jewish law, certain foods were forbidden to be eaten (Lev 11). The food laws made it difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles without risking defilement. The Gentiles were often seen as unclean. Peter's vision meant that he should not look upon the Gentiles as inferior people. Before having the vision, he would have thought that Gentile Roman officer could not accept Christ. Afterwards he understood that it was his responsibility to go with the messengers into a Gentile home and tell Cornelius the Good News of Salvation in Jesus Christ. When Peter entered Cornelius' home, Peter broke a whole list of Jewish rules

The point that we should learn from the episode of Peter and Cornelius is that the Good News of Christ is for everyone. We should not allow any barrier – language, culture, geography, economic level or educational level – to keep us from telling others about Christ. In every nation, there are restless hearts for God, ready to receive the gospel but someone must make it to them like Peter and other apostles. Peter's brief and powerful sermon contains a concise statement of the gospel. His perfect life of servanthood, his death on the cross, his resurrection, personal experiences of his encounter with Christ

Cornelius and Peter were very different people. Cornelius was wealthy, a Gentile, and a military man. Peter was a Jewish fisherman who turned to be a preacher. But God's plan included both of them. In Cornelius' house that day, something amazing happened. A Jewish Christian leader and a Gentile Christian convert each other discovered something significant about God at work in the other person. Cornelius needed Peter and his gospel to know the way to salvation. Peter needed Cornelius and his salvation experience to know that Gentiles were included in God's plan. We all need each other to understand how God works in and through our lives.

**Ad Gentes (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church)** is a decree released during the Second Vatican Council that announces the Catholic Church's commitment to bringing the Gospel to all people. (The name *Ad Gentes* comes from the Latin translation of Jesus' exhortation of the apostles to "go forth.") It establishes evangelization as one of the fundamental missions of the Catholic Church and reaffirms the tie between evangelization and charity for the less-fortunate. *Ad Gentes* also calls for the formation of strong lay groups, as well as strong relations with other Christians. Finally, it lays out guidelines for the training and actions of the missionaries.