

Lent 2019 - 40acts Generosity Challenge
A missional moment for your church

Wednesday 6th March to Saturday 20th April 2019

Notes for Speakers

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What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously'. The acts or challenges are wide-ranging but all are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way.

They can be done by individuals or done in groups but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big difference to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

The Sermon outlines

These seven sermon outlines are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing some of the ideas and biblical principles that underpin the Easter message. Because we know that churches belong to a wide range of denominations, we've chosen not to provide fully scripted sermons. Instead, we have given you the key ingredients, allowing you to combine them in a way that will work best for your congregation.

All biblical quotes are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

About the series

40acts 2019 is inspired by the zeal of the early Christian church as described in the book of Acts. Acts is the account of a small and beleaguered group of those who had known Jesus face to face, and seen him crucified, resurrected and return to his Father's side in heaven. Now they were full of death-defying, insurrectionary passion to proclaim 'the good news that Jesus is the Messiah' (Acts 5:42).

The first disciples were shaped by their profound encounters with Jesus and had witnessed first-hand what he had done for the world. Their love for God meant they not only endured floggings, arrest, death threats and worse, but actively rejoiced because their suffering was a direct result of their devotion (Acts 5:41).

40acts calls us to practical, sacrificial, possibly even risky generosity in the name of Jesus.

Each week we will explore part of the unfolding story of the early church. The 40acts challenges are designed to complement the Bible studies and inspire us to act on what we have read. How you choose to engage with the challenges is up to you (more of that in 'Complimentary materials' below) but it is important you are aware of the connection.

Complementary materials

These sermon notes can be used alongside the 40acts small group resources (tell your small group leaders to sign up at www.40acts.org.uk). The bible studies delve into the lives, passions and challenges of the early Christians.

In a small group setting, people can not only study the early church but also have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing their experiences with each other.

The challenges themselves offer different levels of engagement to allow for individual circumstances, so people can choose what suits them best. There will be a complementary reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight. There is also the option to interact with 40acts via social media platforms, if that's their preference. However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what it looks like to seize your opportunity for radical generosity.

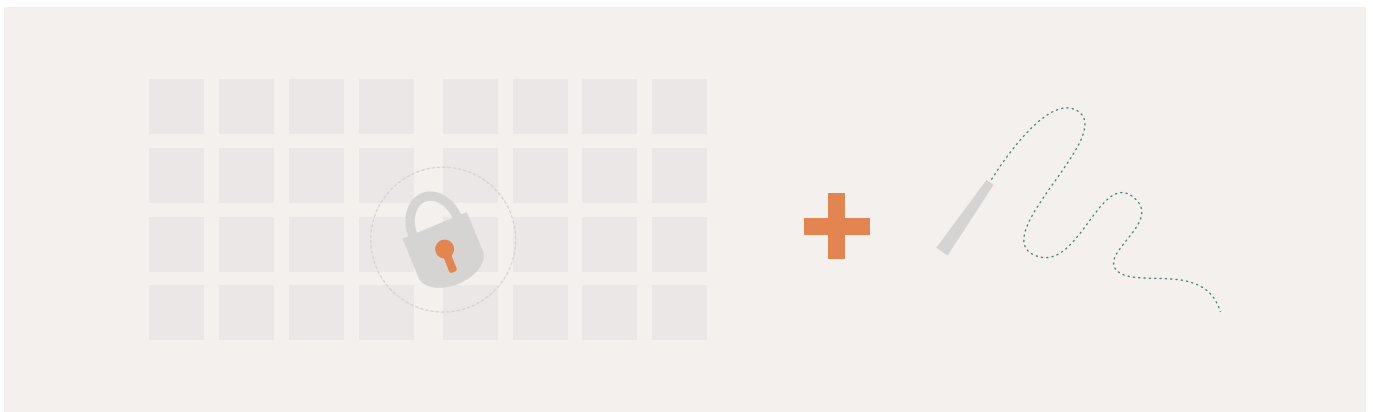
Please use these materials in whole or in part, or just as a reference, or not at all. They are a gift from Stewardship, and feedback from churches and their leaders indicates they work well together.

What we can learn from the zeal and courage of the early church?

Acts 5:40–42

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.



Introduction:

- ★ Before 40acts kicks off officially on Wednesday 6th March, we get a head start by getting inspired by the zeal of the apostles described in this passage. We can take a closer look at why the apostles are actively rejoicing because of their sufferings and not just gritting their teeth and putting up with them.
- ★ Of course 40acts is an accessible challenge to make us think more about how we can be generous day to day, but ultimately it's a way of helping us to be like Jesus to people through our actions and our words. In the UK we may not risk violent treatment for being willing to live out our faith, but we might still need a little more courage.
- ★ It could be that we've lost our first love and the enthusiasm we had for sharing Jesus when we first became Christians. 40acts can be a way to connect again with that passion for his name, to remember the greatest commandments to love God and one another and become aware of how we can look out for others above ourselves.
- ★ The apostles were clear about their mission to spread the gospel and weren't put off despite facing opposition. How clear are we about our mission as disciples of Jesus and how easily are we put off? Does it help if we share our concerns with other Christians and encourage each other?

Context:

- ★ Before this event, the rulers and teachers of the law had already forbidden the apostles to speak in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18) and they had imprisoned them (5:18) because of their jealousy over the disciples' miraculous signs and the growth in the number of believers.
- ★ In the passage just before this, the priests had brought the apostles in before the Sanhedrin and wanted to put them to death, but they were warned by Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was honoured by all the people (Acts 5:34), to let them go. But they didn't let them go without first showing the people that they were deserving of punishment, hopeful, perhaps, that it would be a deterrent to others.
- ★ This was the first actual experience of persecution of the new Christians affecting all of the twelve apostles.
- ★ The flogging the disciples experienced would probably have been the '39 lashes' noted in Deuteronomy 25:2–3:

If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make them lie down and have them flogged in his presence with the number of lashes the crime deserves, but the judge must not impose more than forty lashes. If the guilty party is flogged more than that, your fellow Israelite will be degraded in your eyes.

This is the same punishment that Paul speaks of experiencing in 2 Corinthians 11:24.

The disciples knew to expect this kind of treatment as it had been foretold by Jesus in Matthew 10:17.

Why were the apostles rejoicing?

- ★ Firstly, they would have remembered Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:11-12:

'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

- ★ These are men who had witnessed Jesus' death and knew first-hand the extent to which he had suffered for them. Therefore, they considered it an honour to experience even a small amount of what he'd been through for his sake. They had their eyes on Jesus and what he had done for them and for the world, and their eyes on eternity with him in comparison to their temporary lives on earth.
- ★ A public whipping would have been intended to shame the disciples, but it had the opposite effect on them. The Greek phrase directly translates as an oxymoron – they were described as being 'dignified by indignity'.
- ★ There is a huge difference between the frightened disciples who were too scared to even be seen with Jesus after his arrest, and these men who rejoiced after experiencing the pain of flogging. This shows the power of the Holy Spirit at work in them since Jesus' departure, and their conviction in his resurrection.

Application for us:

- ★ We remember in prayer those parts of our church family in areas of the world where Christians still face physical danger in the form of this kind of punishment, or worse, for their faith. In Western society, though we may not be persecuted in this way, we may still expect to be treated with disdain for our faith. Some of us can relate to sarcasm or ridicule by even our closest non-believing friends or family. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 4:12-14 that this is something we should expect as Christians:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

It may not make sense to us, but God's way is so often opposite to the world's way of thinking. Our focus as Christians is eternal, looking forward to our heavenly inheritance, and God has promised to be with us always whilst we are on earth, whatever we are going through.

- ★ The apostles never stopped in their devotion to share the good news of Jesus (Acts 5:42). We might feel it was easier for them to have this perspective because they had met Jesus in the flesh and it was all so recent and fresh for them. They trusted that God was working through it, as in Romans 8:28:

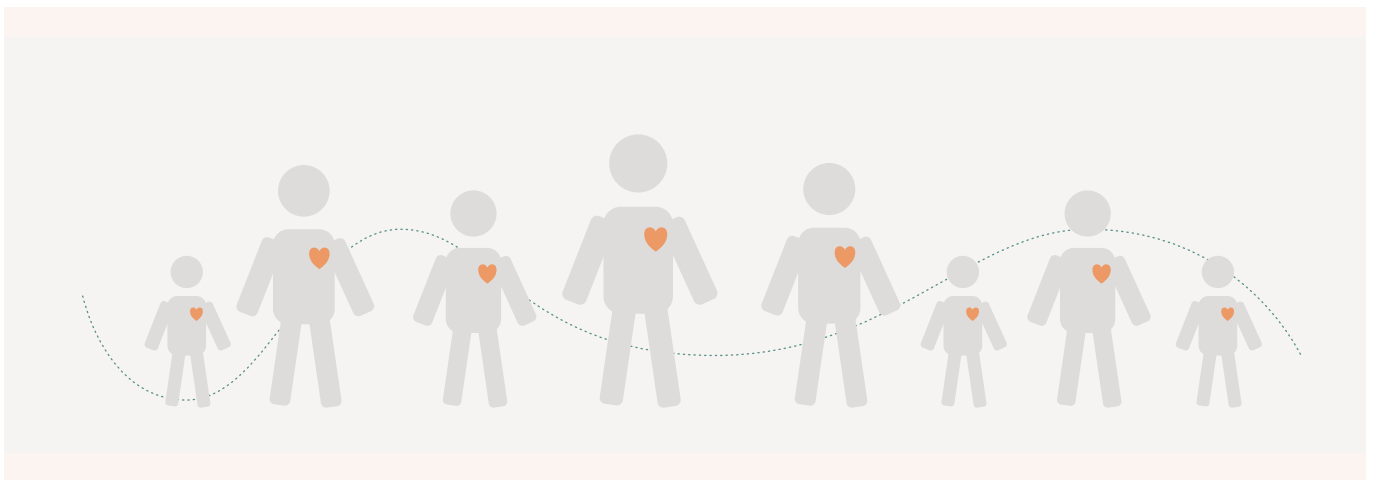
And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

- ★ They had seen and understood the victory that came after the death of Jesus, so trusted that God could redeem the worst of all situations. How can we keep Jesus alive in our minds and hearts so that we have a similar perspective? We can ask God to increase our faith – drawing strength from his Word and stepping out in faith to do his will.
- ★ The apostles and new Christians spoke about Jesus day after day (Acts 5:42). They couldn't help themselves. It wasn't just something for holy days or the Sabbath – 40acts is a chance to become aware of how we can daily bless others. They did so both in public (the temple courts) and in private (their homes). They didn't stick to preaching in safe places, even though it got them into trouble. Why not use 40acts as an opportunity to be brave, step out of your comfort zone and let your love for Jesus become more public? Of course, be sensitive to others but don't talk yourself out of embracing God's agenda.

Community living: giving and sharing possessions with joy and being hospitable to one another

Acts 2:42–47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.



Introduction:

- ★ This week we are looking to be encouraged by the unity of the early church – unity is something we often struggle with today, between denominations as well as within churches.
- ★ We can see in this passage that the early church relied on each other in everything. Disunity wasn't an issue because they put community before individual interests.
- ★ In Mark 16:17 Jesus spoke to the eleven disciples before his ascension and promised the many wonders and signs that would be done.

the family would normally break it at the start of a meal, after blessing the food. So the phrase 'breaking bread together' indicates friendship and intimacy with one another in Hebrew culture. It could reference Communion as well, especially as at that time the Lord's Supper was still associated with a regular evening meal.

Context:

- ★ This is the account of the very first believers, a rapidly growing number of 3,000 or more who became believers after Peter had shared the gospel message with the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks.
- ★ Unlike us, these new Christians had no New Testament to study from, so the only way for them to learn was to eagerly listen to the teaching of the apostles and devote themselves to it. They would naturally have wanted to know all the details of Jesus' life from those who had lived alongside him.
- ★ The bread the Hebrews ate was usually thin and brittle so that it had to be broken rather than cut, and the head of
- ★ When Jesus was alive, he and the disciples were provided for from one common stock of which Judas was treasurer, the money coming from the personal means of individuals such as the women in Luke 8:1–3. They lived as one family with all their needs in common. This new community seem to be emulating this way of living, providing for each other above keeping hold of personal goods. The disciples likely passed on what Jesus had taught them in Luke 12:32–33:

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.'

- ★ It may seem strange that the new followers of Jesus should still be meeting in the temple, particularly after he was almost stoned there on several occasions (John 8:59, 10:31). But the disciples would have also remembered how he called it his Father's house (John 2:16) and how he was horrified that it was being used as a place to buy and sell. All Israelites were allowed into the courts of the temple, as long as they were not disturbing its peace, and so they continued to meet there and find new listeners to their preaching.

How did this community manage to live in such unity?

- ★ 'Fellowship' is what they demonstrated so well. Meeting frequently, spending time eating and being together socially, not just in the temple courts but also in one another's homes, shows us that their fellowship was genuine and joyful. There was little to no divide between the sacred and the secular for them.
- ★ The church and the apostles had a mindset fixed on eternity. They were acting under urgency, because they did not know when Jesus would again return (as the apostles had been told he would in Acts 1:11). They had the freedom of being unattached to this world and the things that it offers, because they were set upon seeing Jesus again and being brought into the fullness of salvation. As in Colossians 3:2, their minds were set on things above, not on earthly things.
- ★ They gave up their own possessions and property for the good of the whole. This church is a picture for us of Paul's later teaching on living like one family and one body where everyone is looked after. Some theologians think this is in part because they knew that destruction was coming on Jerusalem, and so they had nothing to lose in giving up their possessions. But they clearly had a compassion for the poor, no doubt because it was one of the main concerns of Jesus. We will revisit this topic in a couple of weeks.
- ★ Because they lived so closely together and regarded themselves as one, there was a lack of envy or complaint about their individual lot. They were constantly thankful, firstly for their salvation, and secondly, in knowing that all they had came from God.
- ★ They were united because of their common aim, that Jesus should be known as widely as possible, and so again, there was a sense of urgency that the gospel should be preached to as many as possible. With this in mind, their personal cares and worries became less important.
- ★ In Acts 2:42, the word translated in this version as 'devoted' comes from the Greek word *proskarterountes*, which means 'attending one, remaining by his side, not leaving or forsaking him' – you could say these Christians were stuck 'like glue' to Jesus.

Application for us:

- ★ We live in an incredibly individualistic society, where competition between people is rife and each person is centred on their own interests. What can we learn from the culture of empathy for one another and self-denial in the early church?
- ★ They knew that as novice Christians, they were individually weak, but they held on to one another so that they were a strong force together. How can we encourage one another and devote ourselves to Jesus' teaching, just like the early church?
- ★ The first Christians were of Jewish descent but there were also Jews from all different nations who had been present at the festival and became Christians in Jerusalem. They spoke different languages but were united in their common purpose and love for Jesus. Are we ensuring that our churches are open and inclusive to people of all nationalities?
- ★ It wasn't just the apostles' preaching; it was this generous and sacrificial community that attracted more and more people to know Jesus. They were living out Jesus' words in John 13:34–35:

'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'
- ★ How can we as a church show this love to each other? And be known by other people for our love for each other? Keep this in mind in the next week as we do our daily acts of generosity.
- ★ The Christians were meeting and preaching daily, and so people were added to their number daily. Have we lost the perseverance, passion or energy to tell others about Jesus? The emphasis on Acts 2:47 is clear: the early church was zealous, but it was the Lord that was working through them and adding to their number. We can sometimes forget that Jesus is alive today and still working in us and through us – surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).
- ★ As much as a church is defined by its teaching or leaders, it is more so defined by the lives of the people in it. It's not the service and the church activities that make a church but the actions of its members loving and caring for each other. How can we show a love for each other which spills over into our whole lives?

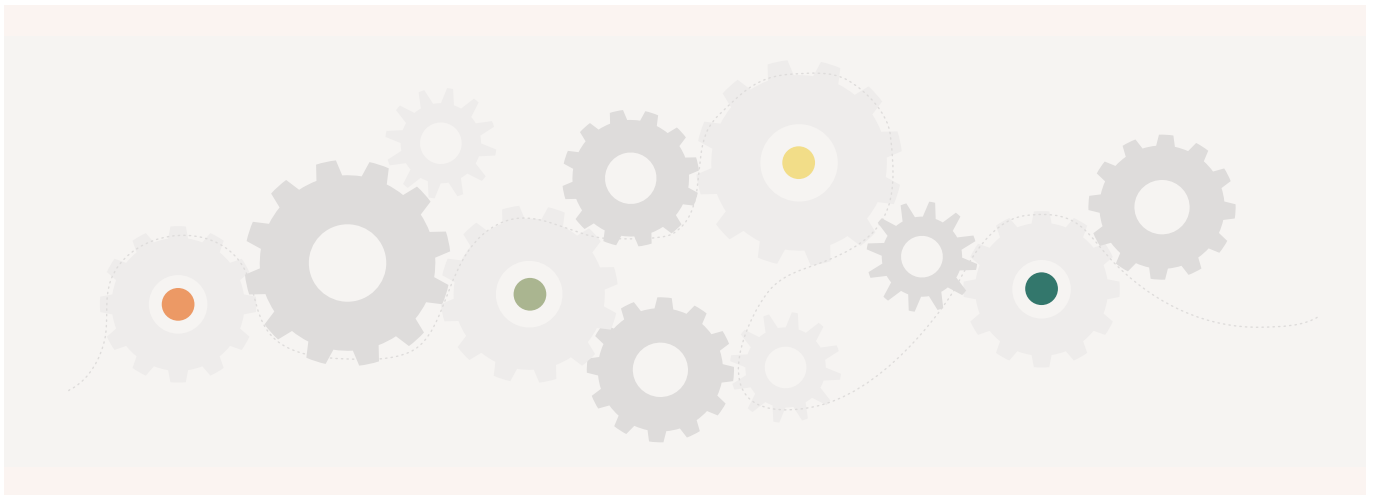
Practical responsibilities and tasks are valuable gifts

Acts 6:1–7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.



Introduction:

- ★ We've looked at and learnt from the unity of the early church, but here they meet their first – very practical – problem.
- ★ An apparent inequality creates tension between the new Christians.
- ★ The problem is resolved, not by the apostles taking it all in hand themselves, but by finding people who are particularly suited to the job.
- ★ We see here that it's not just gifts of teaching and preaching that are relevant in the church, but there are many, many ways to serve and build each other up. And some of these ways are intensely practical.

Context:

- ★ The dispute here was between the two groups of Jews: the Hebrews – or Palestinian Jews – and the Greek-speaking Jews who came from other nations. There were likely to be tensions between these two groups anyway, because of cultural differences. The Jews of Palestine would have prided themselves on the fact that they lived in the land of their ancestors – the patriarchs of the faith – and were close to the temple. The Jews from other parts of the world may well have been envious of the Hebrews. They were typically more zealous in their behaviour, and, as pilgrims to Jerusalem, demonstrated more reverence for the holy places than the Jews who had been familiar with them all their lives.
- ★ This issue was the first sign that the church was outgrowing its initial structure and was increasing so much that new measures had to be put in place. We aren't told how bad the problem of the overlooked Hellenistic widows was, or whether the complaints were

an overreaction. But whatever the cause, the apostles saw fit to swiftly resolve it.

- ★ We know that widows were given special attention in the early church because they had limited inheritance rights, and were often left with little economic or social support. Providing for them was something that was written about often in the letters of the New Testament, especially in 1 Timothy; James 1:27 says this:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

- ★ The daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1) was collected every day from the Jews who offered anything from a piece of bread to some money, and in the evening was divided and given to the poor.
- ★ The apostles dealt with the situation tactfully. Without taking sides, they delegated, knowing the precedent of Moses' delegation (Exodus 18:25) and allowing every member of the church a right to vote.
- ★ The expression 'to wait on tables' means to take care of or provide for the daily needs of a family. The word for 'tables' here is also the same word used in other parts of the Bible to mean the tables of money changers, so it has a reference to provision in both circumstances.
- ★ The apostles were not looking down on this task as something beneath them. The emphasis is on the fact that if they took this on as well, they would be forsaking their main purpose, which was to tell people about Jesus. The fact that they asked that the men chosen for this should be full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3) shows that they valued this responsibility.
- ★ All of the men listed have Greek names, which doesn't necessarily mean they were all Hellenistic Jews, but it's probable that a good number of them were. We know one of them was a Jew not by birth but by conversion. It shows discretion and a generous spirit that the church chose candidates who were from among the Jews who had made the complaint.
- ★ Both Stephen and Philip we will see again in this series. Stephen became the first Christian martyr and Philip became later known as Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8), so the men chosen for this role were by no means restricted to this distribution as their only duty.
- ★ It was a Jewish custom to lay hands on a person who was being set apart for a particular appointment, such as a scribe becoming a teacher. Jesus also often laid hands on the sick when he prayed for them. It was not that there was any healing in the action itself, but it was a sign that the power came from him. It became a customary sign, alongside prayer, designating a new appointment in the early church too.

- ★ It's significant that in Acts 6:7 we are told that many priests had come to faith. Up until this point, no priest had been named as a follower of Jesus. It shows the power of the gospel to break through every barrier no matter how well established.

What does the requirement that these men were full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3) tell us about different areas of service in the church? And how can we ourselves be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom?

- ★ It might seem surprising that an apparently practical role should have had such a spiritual requirement. But should there be any division? God can use all our gifts for his glory, whether we view them as 'spiritual' or not.
- ★ The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:6) as they began their role, showing the significance they placed on this appointment. There's no room for 'holiness hierarchy' here: this job has value within their spiritual community.
- ★ Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit is meant for both personal refreshment and also to be a blessing to others in John 7:37-39:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

We need to be filled so that when we serve others, we are not giving out of our own emptiness but out of an overflow of the spirit.

- ★ Jesus told his disciples in Luke 11:13:

'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

There's no limit to any one of us being filled if we seek it, because clearly God wants to give the Holy Spirit generously. The only prerequisite is our trust – Stephen was a man full of faith (Acts 6:5) and so naturally full of the Spirit also. In that verse from John, it says twice that it will be given to those who believe in Jesus. So it is the combination of both the expectation and the desire for it in prayer.

- ★ Romans 8:5 says:

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

Being filled up with the Holy Spirit is not a one-time thing but a continual process: coming to Jesus to be filled and setting our minds on him – being devoted in the same way that we saw the new Christians were devoted to the apostles' teaching last week.

In James 1:5, it is clear that if we need wisdom, we only have to ask:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

Application for us:

★ We can see in this passage that every role is important. 1 Corinthians 12:11 says:

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

★ We might struggle to identify our own gifts or wish we were gifted in different ways, but we've each been given our gifts specifically and for a purpose. Is there anything you're good at or that comes to you easily that you haven't before considered could be used to bless others? Better still, ask someone else what gifts they see in you – it may surprise or encourage you.

★ 1 Corinthians 12:18–20 shows the value of every part of the body working in harmony:

But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

★ The passage shows a church in a prime position to grow – it had influence and the number of converts was increasing rapidly (Acts 6:7). Part of this was having the right people in the right roles. Is there anyone we can encourage to have the confidence to step into a new role where you think they would thrive?

★ There are two danger areas for us: (1) not recognising the importance of our gifts in the life of the church or (2) not allowing the gifts of others to flourish. In both cases we risk hindering the growth and well-being of the body and the spread of the gospel message. Consider whether you might be in danger of falling into either of those mindsets.

★ Prayer and the input of others may help to determine what your gifts are and how they could be used best to serve the church or bless others. Equally, as members of the body of Christ we all have a role to play in encouraging and enabling others to exercise their gifts fully.

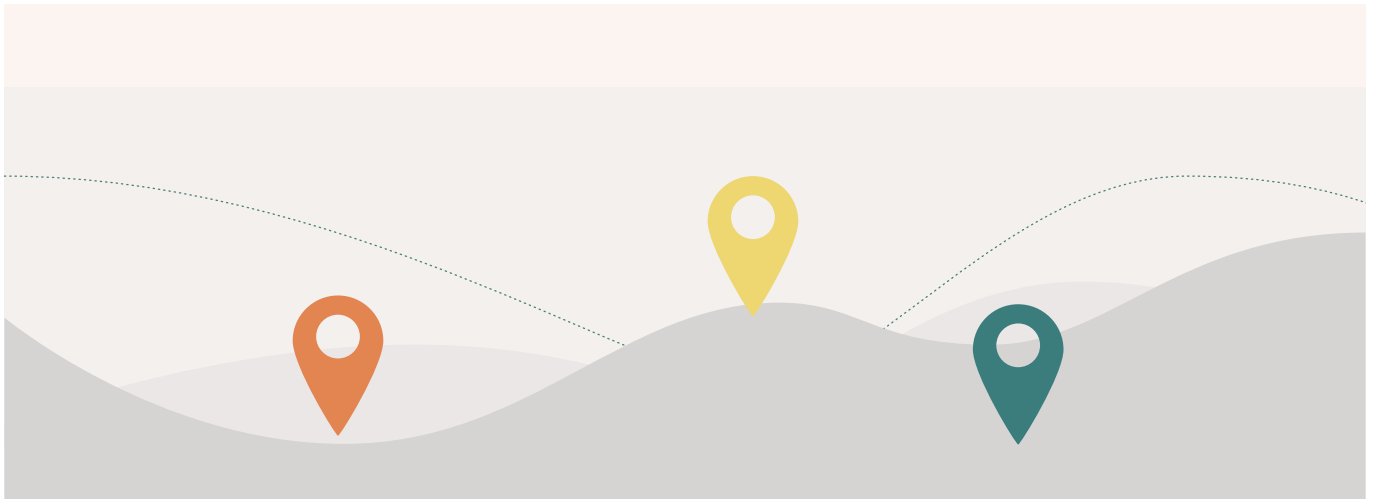
Using the location you've been placed in to do God's work: 'bloom where you're planted'

Acts 8:1-8

And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.



Introduction:

- ★ This passage shows us that there is always a purpose and a plan in where we are located – we can 'bloom where we're planted' and find ways to serve God in the areas we live and work.
- ★ It's an example of how God worked through something that was meant to harm and destroy.
- ★ There was a lot of movement of people – all were displaced except for the apostles (Acts 8:1). The new followers of Jesus accepted their situation and used it to spread the good news further and further, preaching and proclaiming wherever (8:4) they went, even though some of them found themselves in prison.

Context:

- ★ This passage begins immediately after the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. We will be looking at the account of his death in a few weeks' time. But it seems to be Stephen's death that is the catalyst for more persecution to break out. The persecutors were resentful of the success of the apostles and so resolved to put a stop to their progress.
- ★ Both men and women were persecuted and imprisoned. The phrase 'dragged off' quite literally means to drag, as if by their hair, and implies brutal treatment.
- ★ The picture of Saul here is not a pleasant one. The word translated as 'destroy' is a strong word usually used for wild animals or birds of prey. The same word is used in Psalm 80:13 to describe a wild boar ravaging a vineyard.
- ★ Samaria was a region despised by the Jews (Romans 10:19), but they received the message of Jesus eagerly and with joy. In some respects the Samaritans were

better prepared to receive the gospel than the Jews because they lacked the Jewish preconceptions about the Messiah's reign and the influence of the principles of the Sadducees.

- ★ Philip – who we will look at again next week – was a gifted evangelist and became known as such (Acts 21:8). An even stronger word than 'preach' is used – one that means to proclaim as a crier. Crowds listened to him and came to faith. He went to a city in Samaria that is unnamed, but it's likely to have been the city of Sichem, the capital. This city was below Jerusalem which would explain why he was described as going 'down' to it. It is also where Jesus himself had previously preached at the beginning of his ministry, where he met with the Samaritan woman, and where some came to faith. He described the place in John 4:35 as ripe for harvest.
- ★ The miracles were evidence of the truth of Philip's message and that God was behind it. The shrieks (Acts 8:7) that were heard may have been the resistance of the unclean spirits to being removed or else a cry of celebration from those being delivered. Luke, the writer of Acts, is clear to distinguish between unclean spirits and diseases, perhaps because he was a doctor and would have been familiar with both.
- ★ There was great joy (Acts 8:8) because of the healings, the conversions to Christ and the joy of family and friends as more and more people came to be saved.

What motivated the Christians to preach the gospel so profusely?

- ★ The neighbouring towns became places of refuge, but more than that, they were places where the gospel was heard for the first time. The Christians were scattered like seeds, but wherever they fell they sprouted.
- ★ The apostles must have preached powerfully in order to break through the prejudices of the Jewish people towards Samaritans. They knew that, just like them, the Samaritans needed a Saviour, and there was no sense in which they were any more unworthy to receive it than the Jews themselves.
- ★ These Christians were neither commissioned to preach nor especially trained to do so, but they were full of faith in Jesus and thankfulness for his love, and so their preaching was a natural overflowing of their hearts. Jesus said that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of (Matthew 12:34) and they preached in conversation wherever they went.

Application for us:

- ★ These new Christians were the ones that affected and influenced the areas they were in, producing, especially as we are told in the case of Philip, great joy in that city (Acts 8:8). Sometimes we might need to question whether we are the ones influencing for good the place we're in or whether we're being influenced instead.
- ★ How can we serve the communities and neighbourhoods we've been placed in? Whether we're going to be somewhere for a short time (like at university or for a short-term job) or for the long haul, we can make a difference. Even if we dislike where we currently are, we can ask God for opportunities to serve and grow, growing in love for our surroundings and the people in our path.
- ★ Persecution always seems to produce the opposite result to its intention: here the church expands instead of being subdued. Are we too complacent about sharing the gospel because we do not have that same sense of urgency? How do we overcome our inaction?
- ★ We may not experience this kind of persecution for our faith but we can still pray for our brothers and sisters in parts of the world that are hostile towards Christians – that God gives them strength, comfort and peace as they make a stand for the gospel.

Openness to God's calling: spending time with others sharing the Bible with them

Acts 8:26–40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means 'queen of the Ethiopians'). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Philip asked.

'How can I,' he said, 'unless someone explains it to me?' So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

*'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

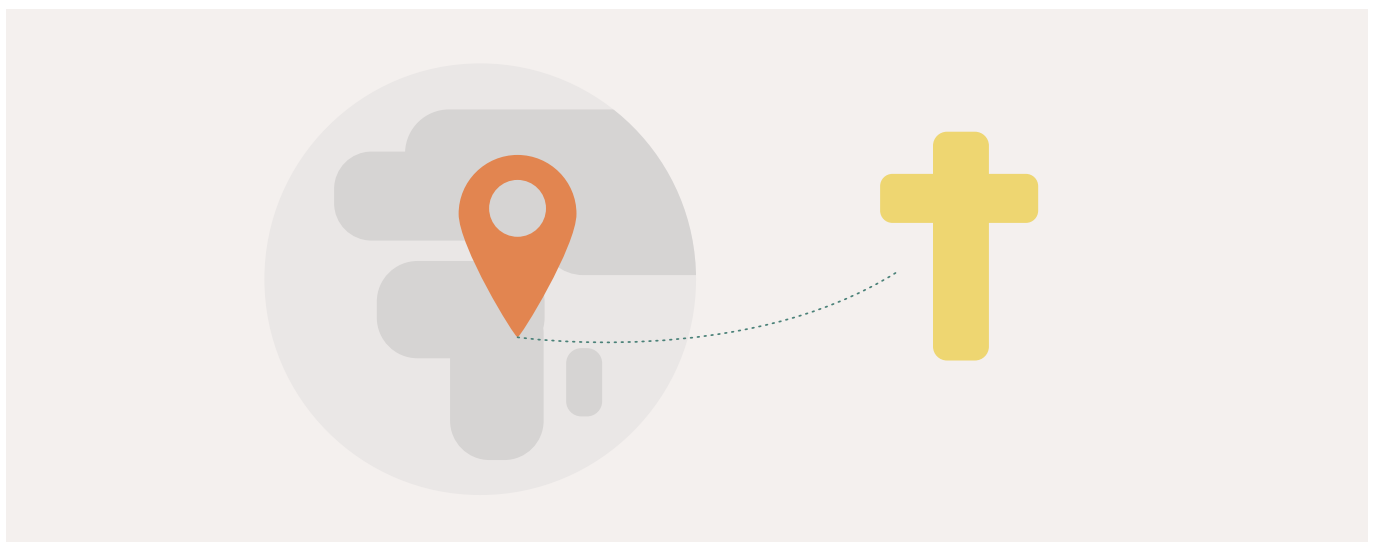
In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.



Introduction:

- ★ Philip had been successfully teaching and preaching in Samaria, and may have wondered why he had been asked to travel away from there. But he obeyed straight away.
- ★ He was listening to God and followed God's instructions. The Holy Spirit didn't explain the purpose of the journey to Philip – he gave instructions one by one and Philip had the faith to obey each one and trust where God was leading him.

Context:

- ★ As a courtier of the Ethiopian queen, the eunuch would most likely have been travelling with a whole procession of attendants, so Philip would have seen the group from afar and run towards them.
- ★ The area referred to as Ethiopia here is not the country of Ethiopia we know today; it was a region that encompassed parts of Abyssinia, Egypt and Sudan.
- ★ It is debated whether or not the eunuch was the first gentile convert. Physical eunuchs were not allowed to convert to Judaism, but 'eunuch' was also a term used for any confidential officer, counsellor of state or chamberlain. The fact he was in possession of the Jewish scriptures suggests he may have been a convert and was probably on his way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There had been dispersed Jews in his country for many years.
- ★ There were at least two ways to get from Jerusalem to Gaza – one was through a more populated route, and one was a more unusual route through uninhabited desert land, which is the way Philip was instructed to go. This road gave Philip the privacy to speak to the Ethiopian undisturbed.
- ★ The Ethiopian was reading aloud because silent reading was almost unheard of at that time and place, and even considered rude. He may even have been reading to others in his chariot.
- ★ It is possible that the eunuch had heard this passage from Isaiah in Jerusalem, and while the Christians knew it referred to Jesus, the Jews may have skirted round this by saying it referred to Isaiah or Jeremiah, and so he was left confused.
- ★ The direct translation of verse 35 says that Philip 'opened his mouth' – this was a phrase used to mean something more than just the act of speaking; it was speaking with particular weight and importance.
- ★ Psalm 25:9 says:

'He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.'

This man is a good example of someone who was modest and humble enough to listen and accept Philip's greater wisdom, despite Philip being far lower in rank.

- ★ Philip must have explained the concept of baptism to the Ethiopian over the course of their conversation, because as soon as they reached water he was keen to make that statement of faith.
- ★ The whole of the Ethiopian's accompanying party would have witnessed his baptism as well as Philip's miraculous disappearance. Could they have been the next Ethiopian converts to Christianity?
- ★ Philip's departure is described in a similar way to that of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:12 or Ezekiel in Ezekiel 3:14. He appeared (Acts 8:40) in Azotus, a city thirty miles away, and continued to preach, eventually settling in Caesarea, where he appears to have stayed and is later described as having a house and family there in Acts 21:8–9.
- ★ We might have expected Philip to continue travelling with the eunuch and teaching him, but perhaps the nature of Philip's departure just confirmed even more to him and his companions that what they had heard and witnessed was from God and so he rejoiced all the more.

What can we learn from Philip about reading God's word with those that don't yet know him?

- ★ Without living apostles and eyewitnesses, reading Scripture is the best way to learn more about Jesus and increase our faith. Reading God's word with others, either new Christians or those that don't know him, gives them direct access to the truth about who Jesus is.
- ★ We are told that Philip began with that very passage (Acts 8:35) to tell the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. He met him where he was at – he took the opportunity and drew the truth from that particular passage. How willing are we to start from where people are in their spiritual journey rather than jumping in where we think we should begin? We can ask God to help us be sensitive to the needs of those around us, and the specific opportunities he gives us to meet them.
- ★ Philip was willing to dedicate his time to this man – how can we use our time wisely and generously to serve those around us? Can we dedicate time to help explain God's Word to someone? We don't need to have all the answers to do so; we just need to be willing and ask God to work through us.
- ★ If Philip had held back from approaching the Ethiopian because of his rank or through fear of rejection, things might have taken a different turn. But Philip held fast to the Spirit's prompting. This was not a random encounter – the Spirit had already prepared the way for Philip's approach so that it was welcomed.

Application for us:

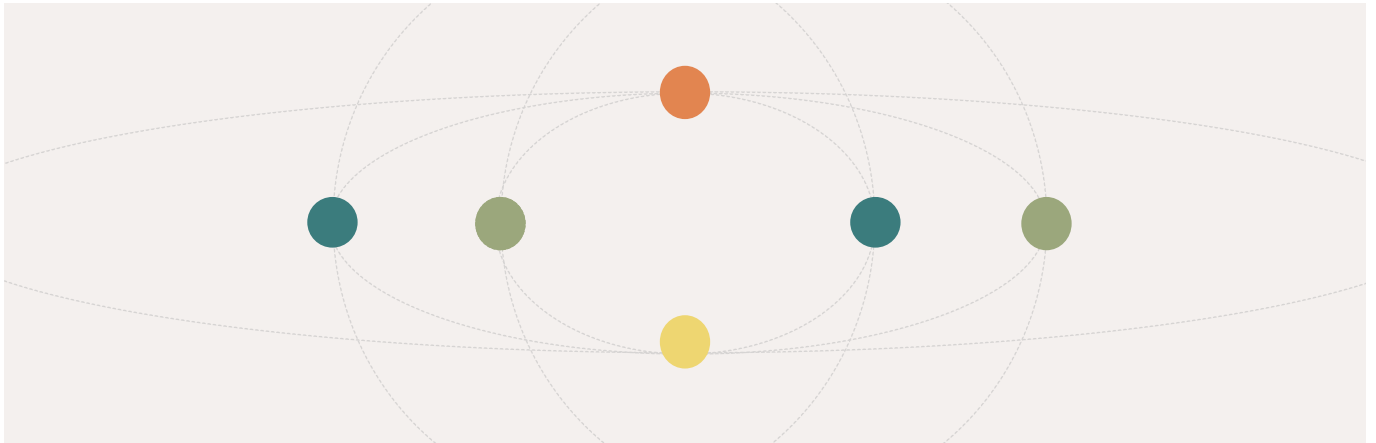
- ★ This week as we ask the Holy Spirit to help us in our generous acts, we can learn from Philip's example by taking time to listen to God and responding when we get a prompt. Remember to ask for God's help to build trust in him and follow him step by step as Philip did.
- ★ In verse 30, Philip ran – he was eager to do God's will. Are we open to hearing from God in our day-to-day lives and obeying his prompts?
- ★ After he had baptised the Ethiopian, the Lord took Philip away and the man did not see him again (Acts 8:39). We may only play a small part in someone's story and not see the full effects of our actions. However we view them, they still have value and significance in God's bigger picture.
- ★ 40acts is about meeting people where they're at. How can we be observant and sensitive like Philip to the needs of those around us this week?
- ★ This passage shows the value that God places on a single person coming to know him – he directed Philip's path specifically so he would encounter this one man. We can be encouraged by this that God is with us in our prayers for friends and family who don't yet know him, and he cares about each of them even more than we do.
- ★ Consider asking a friend to read the Bible with you. You may be surprised at their willingness to learn more.

Giving and sharing sacrificially so that nobody goes without; everyone is held in high esteem

Acts 4:32–37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.



Introduction:

- ★ This passage is similar to the one we looked at in Week 2, showing again the kind of sacrificial community that the church demonstrated.
- ★ They made sure that there were no needy persons among them (Acts 4:34) because they shared their possessions. There was a lack of attachment to material things – no one acted as if the things they owned were any more theirs to claim than anyone else's (4:32).

Context:

- ★ It's as if the persecution that they faced (Acts 4:1–22) had driven them closer both to God and to each other.
- ★ Hebrews would speak of two good friends as being 'one man', so to describe the whole Christian community as being of one heart and mind shows how tightknit they were. As in a close family unit, there was no discrepancy between what was one person's and what was another's. Their actions are a reminder of John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:11:

'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one

who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.'

Their actions also bear out what Jesus said would distinguish believers in him, in John 13:35:

'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

- ★ Focusing on the resurrection was controversial and went to the heart of the gospel; if the Jews were convinced on this point they could not deny the truth of Jesus and his teaching.
- ★ The apostles probably would have been sitting when the money was placed at their feet, which was the traditional position to teach from in Jewish culture.
- ★ Barnabas was called son of encouragement (Acts 4:36), not just because of his help for the poor but because of his gifts of teaching and preaching the gospel, which he was to use later assisting Paul in his ministry. It was Barnabas who brought Paul (still known then as Saul) to meet the apostles when they were afraid of him (9:26–27).
- ★ Barnabas was from the tribe of Levi; by tradition they worked full-time for God and were provided for by the

tithes of the other tribes. They were forbidden to own land, so this land that he sells must have been gained some other way, by purchase or legacy. Later on Paul tells us that Barnabas worked to support himself (1 Corinthians 9:6).

Were the new Christians obliged to give away their money in this way?

- ★ Many of the early Christians were poor, but some of them, it seems, were also wealthy and important people. What they learnt was that the gospel brought them all to the same level, as sinners in need of a Saviour. Some of the Christians may even have been suffering because of their new faith, and been cut off from their previous income or support and so relied on the church for provision.
- ★ This was not a compulsory giving scheme that the church had enforced, but giving based on spontaneous charity, from what individuals felt in their hearts to give. Their giving speaks of gratitude for their own salvation but also an awareness that everything is God's in the first place. See David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29:14:

'But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.'

- ★ They were described as putting the money from the sale of their possessions at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:35) – this gesture shows both surrender and trust. They were entrusting it to God's work, having faith that what they gave was going to be best used for the whole church. They gave over control and added no stipulations or provisos as to how the money would be used.
- ★ The example of Barnabas is probably highlighted because of the prominence of his later ministry with Paul, or perhaps it was the first gift of this kind or magnitude in the church. Barnabas didn't just give his property but he dedicated his whole life to spreading the word of God.

Application for us:

- ★ This was a community mind set, not an individual mindset, and God's grace was powerfully at work. They treated each other as true family in Christ, looking after each other as a godly family unit where everyone was seen as equals. How can we value and bless those struggling financially in our own communities? How can we make sure that as a church we are sensitive to the needs of others?
- ★ Giving generously is a mark of discipleship. Time and again Jesus singled out attitudes to money and possessions in order to make a point. Do we store up treasure on earth or treasure in heaven? See Matthew 6. In Proverbs 19:17 it says that when we give to the poor, we lend to God. We can never give back to God what is already his, but by sharing what we have with those who are without then we 'lend' to God.
- ★ Paul talks of giving as a spiritual gift (Romans 12:8) and encourages us to *share with the Lord's people who are in need* (12:13). How can we recognise and encourage that spiritual gift in our lives today?

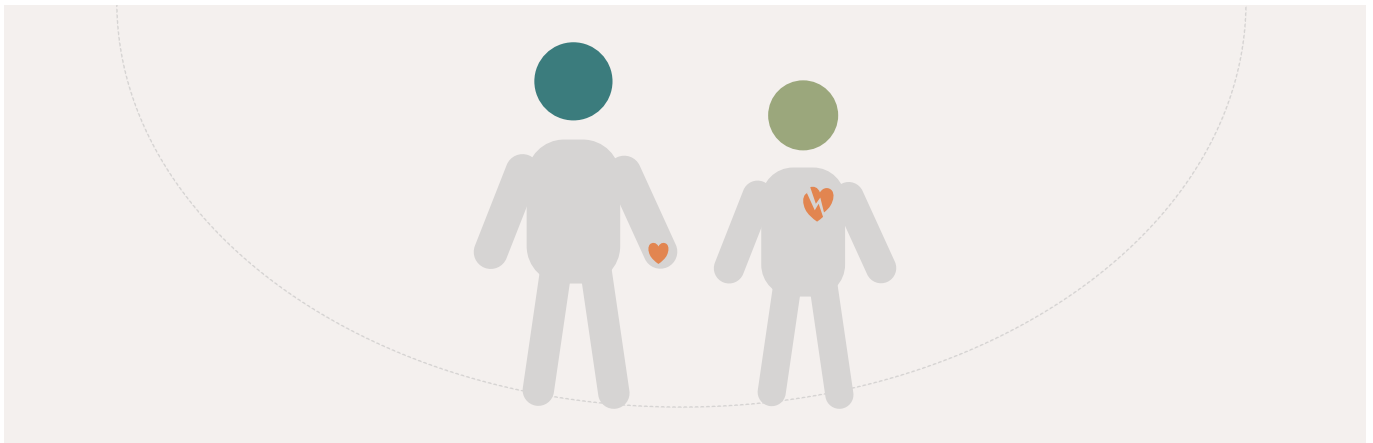
Having compassion on those who have wronged us

Acts 7:54–60

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.



Introduction:

- ★ The dramatic story of Stephen's death echoes one very significant part of Jesus' death on the cross: asking his Father to forgive the perpetrators in his last few breaths. Stephen, too, shows an incredible selflessness as he prays for his attackers during the violence.
- ★ Most of us struggle to forgive for a long time after we have been hurt by someone, let alone being able to forgive in the midst of it all. Here we learn more about this emotional and difficult act of generosity from someone who demonstrated it so sacrificially.

Context:

- ★ Stephen's murder happens after he has spoken about the way that the Jewish fathers had mistreated Moses and Joseph, culminating in an accusation of the betrayal and murder of the Righteous One – Jesus (Acts 7:52). His speech is unequivocal and the result is explosive: the members of the Sanhedrin were furious at being confronted with the truth, which they regarded as blasphemy.

- ★ In verse 54, the members of the Sanhedrin are described as furious, but the literal translation describes them as 'sawn in two'. This vividly describes the magnitude of their fury – anger so great that it drove them almost to madness.
- ★ 'Gnashing of teeth' is a phrase we are familiar with being used to describe the plight of those who have not been saved (Matthew 8:12, 13:42). Here it is used literally, almost as if to express how their anger had gone beyond the point of speaking, into an animal rage – the word originally coming from the sound of wild animals eating noisily and greedily.
- ★ Stephen is described as being full of the Holy Spirit again here – in the Greek, being full implies a permanent state as opposed to a sudden or temporary filling.
- ★ At the start of his speech, Stephen refers to the God of glory (Acts 7:2) and here his life ends with a vision of the glory of God the Father with Jesus standing at his right hand (7:55). There would have been nothing more comforting to Stephen than to fix his eyes on the one for whom he was prepared to die.
- ★ Elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus is described as sitting at

God's right hand (e.g. Matthew 26:64). Jesus standing (Acts 7:55) may represent his readiness – both to help and to comfort Stephen, and also to welcome him into eternity.

- ★ Stephen's description of Jesus in this position of honour and power would have further provoked the furious priests and rulers. Stephen refers to Jesus as the Son of Man (Acts 7:56) – this is the only use of that name outside of the Gospels, and the name that Jesus used most often to describe himself. It would have reminded those listening of the words that Jesus used himself, most notably when he spoke to the Sanhedrin in Matthew 26:64:

'...But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

The name means that Jesus was the perfect embodiment of God in human form. The Jews knew this as the name of the coming Messiah – it is mentioned in Psalm 80:17.

- ★ Because Stephen belonged to the Hellenistic (dispersed) part of the church, it was possible he may never have seen Jesus during his earthly life, which makes it all the more wonderful for him to see and recognise him in this heavenly vision.
- ★ Although at that time the Jews did not have the power to use the death sentence (which they admit to Pontius Pilate in John 18:31) and Stephen doesn't appear to have had a lawful Roman trial, some of the traditions and laws around stoning may still have been observed.
- ★ Stephen was dragged out of the city (Acts 7:58) which was the Jewish custom for stoning – as in Leviticus 24:14, the blasphemer was to be taken outside the camp. He was deemed unworthy to die in the city in which they had judged him of causing detrimental harm.
- ★ Traditionally, in a Jewish stoning for blasphemy, the person would be thrown down from a rock twice the height of a man with their hands bound, and a stone as heavy as two men could carry was rolled down on top of them. If the person was still alive, the onlookers would throw stones, beginning with the witnesses. Deuteronomy 17:7 says:

The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people.

This was to prevent people from falsely accusing others, as they would have to be the ones to carry out the execution.

- ★ Some theologians state that the place where Stephen was stoned could even have been the same execution place where Jesus was put to death.
- ★ This is the first mention of Saul/Paul and he is seen here

looking after the coats of the executioners. Paul mentions this himself in Acts 22:20, when sharing his testimony of transformation. The loose cloak that was worn as an outer garment was often removed for work or running because it hindered full movement.

What can we learn from the similarities and differences between Jesus' death on the cross and Stephen's death?

- ★ Both Jesus and Stephen cry out in prayer in their final moments, but there is an interesting difference between the two. In Luke 23:46 he records that Jesus' final words are 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' Whereas Stephen says (Acts 7:59) 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' The subtle difference seems to show that Jesus willingly gave up his life – he was active in his death and he chose it; as it says in Matthew 27:50, he gave up his spirit. Jesus speaks about his life in John 10:18, saying:

'No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.'

Stephen, on the other hand, asks God to take his spirit, as he knows that it is God in control.

- ★ The other difference in these statements is that Jesus calls upon his Father, whereas Stephen calls specifically upon Jesus as Lord. He recognises Jesus and the Father as one, and Jesus as having power over life and death.
- ★ The second major similarity is both Jesus and Stephen's prayer for their persecutors. In Luke 23:34 Jesus says, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' He perceives what is going on in their hearts and minds. Stephen prays again to Jesus: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:60). He does not claim to understand their motives but trusts God as the judge of all. Stephen had no fear of judgement because he knew himself to be saved by Jesus' sacrifice. Stephen's prayer is more literally translated as 'weigh not out to them this sin' – he knew that Jesus had taken the weight of his own sins, and so he prayed that they also would know Jesus' saving power for themselves.
- ★ Stephen's death is described merely as falling asleep (Acts 7:60). This peaceful death was only made possible by Jesus' death before him. Jesus' death was not merely sleep, because he fully endured death not only physically but with the weight of all sin laid on him (Isaiah 53:6). That is what he endured so that for us as Christians, death is gone. We are free to 'fall asleep' in death, knowing that we will wake up being like Jesus and fully satisfied in him.

Application for us:

- ★ Stephen was able to forgive so much because his eyes were focused on heaven and the glory of God; he was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55)– it was in God's strength, not his own. We can ask God to fill us with his Spirit and help us to forgive beyond our human limitations, whether that may be to show compassion to those who are our 'enemies', to people who have wronged us personally or even to groups of people whose behaviour we find disagreeable.

- ★ It seems as if Luke's main emphasis in recording Stephen's death was to show the power of Christ at work. The vision of Jesus standing in the heavenly realms (Acts 7:55) reminds us that Jesus knows and shares everything that affects his followers. We can take comfort in knowing that Jesus is with us, in us, sees us and is praying for us whatever we are facing.

- ★ Stephen fell on his knees as he pleaded with God to have mercy on his attackers (Acts 7:60). It's an act of submission and surrender – leaving no place for bitterness, anger or fear even in his very last moments. In this we know that when we forgive, we are as much freeing ourselves from those damaging emotions as we are freeing those who've hurt us. If we're experiencing those emotions, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us work through them and make a conscious decision to forgive despite them. This will eventually result in a blessing for us too, when those painful feelings are replaced with peace and a burden lifted.

- ★ We know that Stephen's prayer was answered in one way by the dramatic conversion of Saul (who was clearly complicit in his murder), who became one of the most prominent apostles. How can this encourage us to forgive others in our lives?

- ★ Forgiveness is a part of 40acts because it's one of the most generous acts we can carry out. When we consider the hurt that we may have suffered, it helps to reflect on God's generosity in the cross and the scale of the wrongdoing that he has forgiven. We can always ask for God's grace to forgive, however many times we may need to.

Acknowledgements

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