

Hearts Aflame: A Passion to Serve ... Acts 6:1-7

The book of Acts is quite unique – it's the only unfinished book in the Bible. Why? Because the story is still being written today! Right now, we are in Acts chapter 29.

We need to realise that Acts picks up where the Gospels leave off. We have Jesus commissioning his disciples, and then we see him ascending into heaven – Luke refers to it in 1:1 – the key word there is 'began'. The Gospel account was just the first stage of the life of Jesus, Acts is stage two – as it were, it's the second volume of an ongoing story!

There is so much about this wonderful book that is so exciting, so enthralling – it's a real thriller. It's one of those books that makes the pulse race. It's also a marvellous source book – a goldmine of information. We have lots of info on the Holy Spirit, on the birth of the church, on the beginning of world missions, on the rapid spread of Christianity.

As well as that, it's a book of brand new beginnings – we read about the first local church, the first leadership team of deacons and elders, the first cross-cultural missions movement, the first Gentile Christians, the first use of spiritual gifts, the first wave of persecution, the first martyr: all this, and so much more, in this phenomenal book.

I want us to shine the spotlight on one man – a key man in the great work of God, he's an empowered leader in the early church; he lived in the shadow of Peter and Paul. Philip is that man! A man with a burning passion to serve. In a sense, he is one of the unsung heroes of the book; but, by any stretch of the imagination, he was one of those men whom God used to set the heather on fire in the first century.

Philip comes across in Scripture as a likeable bloke, a genial kind of fellow; he's an articulate individual. He was a Greek-speaking Jew, so that labelled him a Hellenist. Tradition says that he came from a wealthy family. We have no idea as to where and when he was converted to Jesus Christ, but meet the Saviour he did. It's clear that he was held in very high esteem among his peers.

I was intrigued to discover that Philip has the rare honour of being the only man in the New Testament to be described as an evangelist (cf. Acts 21:8). This is amazing; he was just a very ordinary kind-of guy, getting on with his life, but he was totally sold out to the Lord. He had huge family commitments – a wife and four girls! We know from Acts 21 that his girls had the gift of prophecy! He might have been hen-pecked, I don't know! No matter

how we look at him, Philip had an awful lot on his plate, but that did not deter him, he didn't make excuses; it didn't dampen his zeal or cool his enthusiasm to be out there on the frontline for God. It seems to me, Philip has a heart aflame, a passion to serve.

It's even more fascinating when we see how the Lord brought him from the backwoods ... the telltale is in the first few verses of chapter 6. Let me paint the picture for you:

The first century was an exciting era for the early church, the church was on the move with God, they were reaching out into the regions beyond, things were really happening.

The flame was spreading. Stirring accounts are recorded for us in Acts – the Spirit was moving in mighty power; there was a tsunami of blessing as people were gloriously converted. It was electric; I mean, this was high-octane stuff. The atmosphere was charged with an awesome sense of the presence of God. Those were heady days!

But that's only one side of the story; they had their problems! Big problems! You see, the devil doesn't like it when God's work takes huge strides forward. So he does all in his power to throw the cat in among the pigeons. Some of it centred on personalities, even in the first century there was a cult of 'big names'. Much more serious, however, was a clash of cultures: there was ethnic rivalry or

racial tension. By the time we get to Acts 6, the storm clouds are gathering.

There was internal strife, a number of folks were murmuring and muttering! Some of these dear souls were feeling a little neglected, their nose was put out – it seems to me that the enemy was making hay when the sun was shining. Here is the first recorded episode of dissension, disagreement and disunity. Call it what you will, but these are growing pains.

That provides an ageless principle: vibrant, effective, growing churches are not immune to problems. The church is not even six months old, and there's a crisis! The figures tell us there are around 20,000 converts at this point ... all kinds of people in the first-ever mega church!

With numbers like that, it was impossible for everyone to know everyone else; on top of that, you can imagine all these people crammed into the temple square for worship and celebration; and they filtered into hundreds of homes during the week for fellowship and study. In addition, their leaders have already had two scrapes with the law and now have criminal records. And, the church assembly has already witnessed the death of two hypocrites in the middle of a service. Hey, talk about exciting ... this is it!

Things had mushroomed beyond their wildest dreams, there are only 24 hours in a day, only a few men to do the work; it meant the apostles were on a hiding to nothing, they were caught in the middle, it was a catch 22 situation; the reality is, it was impossible for them to do everything. You can see the problem – mind you, it's a good problem to have.

They discovered what D L Moody found out later: it's better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men!

Basically, there were two kinds of Jews in the early church – the locals who had been there from Day One, and the others, incomers, the new kids on the block. The locals were Hebrew Jews, they were fluent in Aramaic and Greek – the others were Hellenist Jews who came from the Greek and Roman world; in a sense they were European in outlook, they were the Jews of the Dispersion. They were often classified as 'second class' Israelites. The locals were narrow and fairly rigid; the others were widely travelled and had seen the big world out there so they were much more open.

There you have it – two groups, two factions, polarisation is the word that springs to mind! You can feel the tension in the air – it came to a head when a severe epidemic of hardship broke out and the Hellenist widows were

given second best. It was the locals who were distributing the food handouts, they were running the soup kitchen – and, because blood is thicker than water, they would look after their own – if there was anything left over, well, that would do the others! A touch of racial prejudice, I suppose.

The inevitable happened – it was a verbal blow-out. The first big bust-up in the early church! And it's over who gets what! So they called a committee meeting, believe it or not! All the apostles put their cards on the table, they stated their priorities: prayer and preaching! The bottom line is: priorities must be maintained in spite of pressure.

There's no way that Joe Public could have their heads and their feet. The workload had to be shared around. Now was the time for others to get involved, to dirty their hands for the gospel. That's when they came up with the bright idea of appointing seven men; what I call, a first century team ministry.

These guys are often called 'deacons' – I'm not too worried what name you give them, it doesn't matter if they wore a badge on their lapel; the won't-go-away fact is, they are servants of the Lord and servants of the church. These were men with a heart for the Lord, a heart for people in need, and a heart for service.

I think there is a vital principle here – God calls every one of us to ministry, and he calls different people to different ministries! It doesn't matter who we are, there's a work for Jesus none but you can do! My question is: what would've happened if they had fallen at this hurdle? What would the outcome have been if they hadn't sorted the problem?

We can only assume, but it seems to me that the Greek guys would have gone off and done their own thing – that would've gone down in history as the first church split! Or, the whole movement could have been holed below the water line and, therefore, it would be seriously weakened. Or, the spreading flame could have been extinguished.

But, thank God, in spite of diversity, there was unity in the boardroom, these men got it right, and the opposite occurred – for we read in verse 7, 'the word of God spread' - the flame burnt brighter and the fire spread rapidly. Isn't that great! The problem became the prelude to new potential – the work goes on! And God uses people ...

One of the famous Seven was our man Philip. There are four things about him that I want us to zoom in on: One, Philip was a committed Christian. We suss that from verse 3. It's obvious that Philip was chosen from among the body of disciples, he was no interloper, he wasn't a fraud. For him to be selected for this

role meant that he was well-known for who and what he was! Mention Philip, and you knew, this guy was a Christian!

A challenge to the rest of us – do people around us know that we are the Lord's? Do we have a testimony in our community, in our workplace, in our street?

We can't pinpoint the date or the place of his conversion to the Lord, but I reckon it probably happened around Pentecost. The preacher man Peter had preached his socks off, he had clearly shown the only way of salvation was Jesus, he pleaded with the people in 2:38 to turn to God. The chances are that Philip was one of the 3,000 that day who came to Jesus. The great fact is, he was there when it happened!

The second hallmark of Philip is that he was consistent in his relationship with the Lord. This is what the NIV hints at when it says: 'choose seven men from among you who are known to be' – the KJV has in there, men 'of honest report'. Put simply, he talked the talk and he walked the walk, He wasn't up and down, he was steady, dependable, and reliable. With Philip, what you see is what you get. There was nothing superficial about him, he wasn't play-acting, he was the Real McCoy. He certainly wasn't a fair-weather Christian, he was more a man for all seasons. He was a man of integrity. When it comes to ministry,

character is much more important than experience.

The third quality we see in Philip is that he was a consecrated believer. We read that he was 'full of the Spirit' in verse 3. He had no big head, he had a big heart. He had no grandiose ideas about himself, he never went on an ego trip, he's not immersed in his own little world – for him, Jesus is number one. He was mastered and monopolised by the living Lord. This brother is surrendered to Christ. When all is said and done, all that Philip wanted to do was to serve the Lord – he had an all-consuming passion to be of some use to his Master.

The fourth trait evident in Philip's life is that of common sense. We glean that from verse 3 with Dr Luke's mention of the word 'wisdom'. Philip was a wise man – now, there's a world of difference between knowledge and wisdom. I know some folks who know an awful lot, they're mobile encyclopaedias when it comes to biblical facts and figures, they know a lot! But, when it comes to wisdom, they're as daft as a brush. Not so Philip, he was a man of stature, a man of wisdom. Basically, in all his service, he was a round peg in a round hole. Guess what, it fits perfectly! Philip was where the Lord wanted him to be, and he was doing what God wanted him to do!

This fella had down-to-earth common sense. He was affable, he was approachable, he was available; he may not have dotted every 'i' or crossed every 't', but he knew the Lord and he had a passion to be the kind of person God wanted him to be.

It seems to me that Philip's track record speaks for itself – read the book and you'll discover that he is a good man, he's a godly man, he's a gifted man. This was the criteria for leadership in the first century church; this was how they picked their leaders, this was how they chose their men for active service. It shows you how far we have strayed from what happened back then – so often today it's the I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine mentality, then we wonder why things don't always work out!

I reckon this man wasn't perfect; in fact, we know he was far from perfect – but he was forgiven. In spite of his failings and shortcomings, this brother has passion, he is fired up, he's on the ball. There's no way you'll find him sitting up there in the bleachers, he's down on the field of play, he's where the action is – that's what passion does!

It drives you to your knees, it propels you into the fast lane, it keeps you on your toes, it gives you a surge of adrenaline, and it doesn't matter where you go, you'll be a blessing to

people. Why? Well, this kind of person is contagious – I mean, what they have rubs off on others, it is infectious.

Some guy is Philip! Can one person make a difference? Yes, they can! Philip did. So can you, so can I! It took a crisis to get him going. A passion to serve. Like him, we need to be set on fire by a spark from the flame of God; men and women with hearts ablaze, people who are willing to burn for Jesus.