



Stephen

The First Christian Martyr

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STEPHEN WAS THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Stephens's story is told in Acts 6:3-8:2. He is also mentioned in Acts 11:19; Acts 22:20.

Around the world, the gospel has most often taken root in places prepared by the blood of martyrs. Before people can *give* their lives for the gospel, however, they must first *live* their lives for the gospel.

One way God trains his servants is to place them in insignificant positions. Their desire to serve Christ is translated into the reality of serving others. Stephen was an effective administrator and messenger before becoming a martyr.

Stephen 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 homes, food, and resources was both a practical and necessary mark of the early church. Eventually, the number of believers made it necessary to organize the sharing. People were being overlooked. There were complaints. Those chosen to help manage were chosen for their integrity, wisdom, and sensitivity to God.

Stephen, besides being a good administrator, was also a powerful speaker.

When confronted in the temple by various antagonistic groups, Stephens's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defense he made before the council.

He presented a summary of the Jews own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners.

During his defense Stephen must have known he was speaking his own death sentence.

Members of the council could not stand to have their evil motives exposed. They stoned him to death while he prayed for their forgiveness.

His final words show how much like Jesus he had become in a short time. His death had a lasting impact on young Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, who would move from being a violent persecutor of Christians to being one of the greatest champions of the gospel the church has known.

Stephens's life is a continual challenge to all Christians. Because he was the first to die for the faith, his sacrifice raises questions: How many risks do we take in being Jesus followers? Would we be willing to die for him? Are we really willing to live for him?

Stephen was

Appointed one of the committee of seven to oversee the daily ministrations

Acts 6:3-6

"Now look around among yourselves, brothers, and select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

We will put them in charge of this business. Then we can spend our time in prayer and preaching and teaching the word."

This idea pleased the whole group, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith, who had now become a Christian). These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

Faith and power of Stephen

Acts 6:8-10

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.

But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia.

None of them was able to stand against the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke.

False charges were given against Stephen

Acts 6:11-15

So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God."

Naturally, this roused the crowds, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the Temple and against the law of Moses.

We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

At this point everyone in the council stared at Stephen because his face became as bright as an angel's.

Defense and trial of Stephen.

Acts, chapter 7

Charges against Stephen

Stephen was charged as a blasphemer of God, and an apostate from the church; therefore he shows that he is a son of Abraham, and values himself on it.

The slow steps by which the promise made to Abraham advanced toward performance, plainly show that it had a spiritual meaning, and that the land intended was the heavenly.

God owned Joseph in his troubles, and was with him by the power of his Spirit, both on his own mind by giving him comfort, and on those he was concerned with, by giving him favour in their eyes. Stephen reminds the Jews of their mean beginning as a check to priding themselves in the glories of that nation.

Likewise of the wickedness of the patriarchs of their tribes, in envying their brother Joseph; and the same spirit was still working in them toward Christ and his ministers.

The faith of the patriarchs, in desiring to be buried in the land of Canaan, plainly showed they had regard to the heavenly country.

Stephen's first defence:

Suffering times often are growing times with the church. God is preparing for his people's deliverance, when their day is darkest, and their distress deepest.

Moses was exceeding fair, "fair toward God;" it is the beauty of holiness which is in God's sight of great price. He was wonderfully preserved in his infancy; for God will take special care of those of whom he designs to make special use.

And did he thus protect the child Moses? Much more will he secure the interests of his holy child Jesus, from the enemies who are gathered together against him.

They persecuted Stephen for disputing in defence of Christ and his gospel: in opposition to these they set up Moses and his law. They may understand, if they do not willfully shut their eyes against the light that God will, by this Jesus, deliver them out of a worse slavery than that of Egypt.

Stephen's second defence:

Men deceive themselves, if they think God cannot do what he sees to be good any where; he can bring his people into a wilderness, and there speak comfortably to them.

He appeared to Moses in a flame of fire, yet the bush was not consumed; which represented the state of Israel in Egypt, where, though they were in the fire of affliction, yet they were not consumed. The death of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, cannot break the covenant relation between God and them. Our Saviour by this proves the future state, Mat 22:31.

In asserting that Jesus should change the customs of the ceremonial law. Stephen was so far from blaspheming Moses, that really he honoured him, by showing how the prophecy of Moses was come to pass, which was so clear. God who gave them those customs by his servant Moses, might, no doubt, change the custom by his Son Jesus.

But Israel thrust Moses from them, and would have returned to their bondage; so men in general will not obey Jesus, because they love this present evil world, and rejoice in their own works and devices.

Stephen Reproves the Jews for the Death of Christ.

Stephen was going on, it seems, to show that the temple and the temple service must come to an end, and it would be the glory of both to give way to the worship of the Father in spirit and in truth; but he perceived they would not bear it.

The gospel was offered now, not by angels, but from the Holy Ghost; yet they did not embrace it, for they were resolved not to comply with God, either in his law or in his gospel. Their guilt stung them to the heart, and they sought relief in murdering their reprover, instead of sorrow and supplication for mercy.

The martyrdom of Stephen

Nothing is so comfortable to dying saints, or so encouraging to suffering saints, as to see Jesus at the right hand of God: blessed be God, by faith we may see him there.

Stephen offered up two short prayers in his dying moments. Our Lord Jesus is God, to whom we are to seek, and in whom we are to trust and comfort ourselves, living and dying. And if this has been our care while we live, it will be our comfort when we die.

Here is a prayer for his persecutors. Though the sin was very great, yet if they would lay it to their hearts, God would not lay it to their charge.

Stephen died as much in a hurry as ever any man did, yet, when he died, the words used are, he fell asleep; he applied himself to his dying work with as much composure as if he had been going to sleep. He shall awake again in the morning

of the resurrection, to be received into the presence of the Lord, where is fulness of joy, and to share the pleasures that are at his right hand, for evermore.

Saul witnesses the stoning of Stephen

Acts 8:1

Saul was one of the official witnesses at the killing of Stephen.

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem, and all the believers except the apostles fled into Judea and Samaria.

Acts 22:20

And when your witness Stephen was killed, I was standing there agreeing. I kept the coats they laid aside as they stoned him.'

Life application

Striving for excellence in small assignments prepares one for greater responsibilities.

Real understanding of God always leads to practical and compassionate actions toward people

Stephen was known as one of seven leaders chosen to supervise food distribution to the needy in the early church.

Stephen was known for his spiritual qualities of faith, wisdom, grace, and power, and for the Spirit's presence in his life. He was an outstanding leader, teacher, and debater. He was the first to give his life for the gospel

Key verses:

“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” (Acts 7:59-60).

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

Reference:

Matthew Henry Concise Bible Commentary.