

# Stephen's Martyrdom

**Key Verse:** *"They stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

—Acts 7:59

**Selected Scripture:**  
**Acts 7:51-8:2**

## **WHEN STEPHEN FINISHED**

his discourse to the Jewish council, he boldly questioned them as to why they resisted the arrangements of God as their forefathers had resisted Moses and the prophets. He said, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it."—Acts 7:51-53

The reaction of the council to Stephen's words was that of extreme anger. "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." (vs. 54) The phrase "cut to the heart" has the meaning of being "sawn asunder," or "rent with vexation" in their heart, the seat of their motivations and character. This "cutting" effect of the word of truth reminds us of Paul's words in Hebrews 4:12, "The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." How true it was that the evil intents of their hearts

were now fully displayed against Stephen, even though he had only spoken to them truth from the Word of God.

As the anger of the Jewish leaders reached a climax, Stephen was reassured. The account says that he looked up to heaven and saw, in a vision, “the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.” He then stated to those gathered, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55,56) This vision gave reassurance and comfort to Stephen that God was pleased with the witness he had given. Such reassurance was provided at just the right time, because immediately the Jews “cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him.”—vss. 57,58

The thought of our Key Verse, as translated and punctuated in the King James version, is not that those stoning Stephen were calling upon God, as a cursory reading might indicate. It is clear, rather, from the entire verse, that it was Stephen who called upon God, and asked him to receive his spirit—breath of life. Finally, we have Stephen’s last words—epitomizing a fully developed character of Christlike love and forgiveness—spoken in a loud voice, for all to hear, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”—vs. 60

Of all those who witnessed this entire experience, none were ultimately impacted as much as Saul, who at the time “was consenting unto his death.” (chap. 8:1) His consent was shown by the fact that witnesses had laid their clothes down at his feet. (chap. 7:58) The forgiving attitude manifested by Stephen in his final words as he was being stoned were possibly overruled by God specifically to be heard in the ears of this young man, Saul, who soon after would be converted and become the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” ■