

The First Christian Martyr

Key Verse:
*“Stephen, full of
faith and power,
did great wonders
and miracles
among the people.”*
—Acts 6:8

Selected Scriptures:
Acts 6:7-10; 7:1-60

Stephen's martyrdom appears to have occurred not long after Pentecost, following a period of rapid growth in the Early Church. That season of peace and increase prepared believers for the trials that soon followed. Stephen's death marked the beginning of persecution against the Church and illustrated the call for Christ's followers to remain faithful even unto death.—Rev. 2:10

Originally chosen to help serve the practical needs of the congregation, Stephen proved to be a man of exceptional spiritual strength and talent. He is described as “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 6:5) His faith, love, and zeal for the Lord made him an effective witness to the Truth. His wisdom and spirit of holiness were so remarkable that his opponents could not successfully argue against him.—vs. 10

Unable to overcome his reasoning, his enemies brought him before the Sanhedrin through false and distorted testimony. Though facing a charge that could lead to death, Stephen showed no fear. Instead, his face reflected calmness, purity, and confidence in God. The account states that all that sat in the council “saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”—vs. 15

Stephen's address before the council, recorded in Acts 7:2-53, showed both courage and deep knowledge of Israel's history. In its closing words he plainly charged his hearers with resisting God and bearing responsibility for rejecting Jesus. (vss. 51-53) Rather than repent, they became enraged. Stephen remained steady even as their anger rose. He was granted a vision of heavenly glory and declared that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This statement drove his accusers to end the trial and execute him by stoning. Saul of Tarsus was present and gave his approval to the act.—vss. 54-60

As he died, Stephen prayed both for himself and for those who were killing him, asking that their sin not be charged against them. In this he reflected the spirit of Christ. Verse 60 describes his death as a sleep. Most assuredly, Stephen believed in the resurrection and that he would be awakened from the "sleep" of death in due time. The phrase "slept with his fathers" appears nearly forty times in the Old Testament, referring to the sleep of death.

While being tormented by Satan, Job asked for relief in the sleep of death until the resurrection morning saying, "I wish you would hide me in a grave! I wish you would cover me up until your anger passes by! I wish you would set the time for me to spend in the grave and then bring me back up!" (Job 14:13, *New International Readers Version*) Jesus corroborated Job's statement, saying, "All that are in the graves shall hear his [the Son of man's] voice, And shall come forth."—John 5:28,29

Stephen's faithful witness became an example for later believers. Though persecution may take different forms, the call to suffer faithfully for Christ remains. Stephen was the first overcomer of the Christian Age recorded in the Scriptures following Pentecost to have been found faithful to have part in the "first resurrection." (Rev. 20:6) May his life and death encourage us to speak with grace, stand with courage, and keep our eyes fixed on the Lord. ■