

Stephen

Read Acts 6-7.

Following the events of Acts 2, the Church in Jerusalem experienced explosive growth, and as a result, the apostles were faced with new challenges. One of these challenges was the distribution of food to widows in need. In response, seven men, including Stephen, were chosen to serve as deacons to facilitate this process.

Stephen quickly emerged as a powerful evangelist and defender of the faith. He performed great wonders and signs among the people and boldly proclaimed the Gospel message in the Synagogues of the Freedmen.

Talking Points:

1. Stephen, one of the Greek-speaking appointees as a deacon by the apostles, became a powerful and effective preacher of the Gospel.
2. His preaching ministry was based in the synagogue of previous slaves who had been given their freedom. Many came to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. Opponents of the Gospel hated Stephen.
3. Stephen was arrested by the Sanhedrin, a council of 70 men plus the High Priest. He was accused of blasphemy against Moses and God by false witnesses.
4. Stephen delivered a convincing sermon to his accusers, walking them through their Jewish history in proof that Jesus was the Messiah and that they had ordered Him to be crucified.
5. At the close of his sermon, Stephen declared that he could see Jesus standing up at the side of His Father in honor of his testimony. The Sanhedrin was so angered that they ordered Stephen to be stoned to death.
6. Stephen's last words of forgiveness to those stoning him echoed those of Jesus' last words on the cross.
7. Stephen was the first recorded believer to be killed for his faith. Stephen's death initiated a widespread persecution of the Church by Saul of Tarsus.

Background

Before His death, Jesus had informed His disciples that they would face persecution for their faith in Him. He told them, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). Initially, the persecution took the form of harassment. However, with Stephen's death, it took a more violent turn. This event marked the beginning of widespread persecution against Christians in Jerusalem and beyond.

What was it that the Jewish religious leaders were afraid of? Why did they hate Stephen so much that they were willing to kill him? The answer lies in the powerful truth of Stephen's message. He boldly proclaimed Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the

promised Savior of Israel. This went against everything the Jewish leaders had been taught and believed and challenged their authority and traditions.

Stephen's message also highlighted their guilt in Jesus' crucifixion, something they were not willing to accept or acknowledge. By stoning Stephen, they thought they could silence the truth and protect their power and status among the people. But even in death, Stephen's faith and forgiveness shone brightly. His example inspired many to stand firm in their faith, even facing persecution. And ultimately, his death catalyzed the spread of the Gospel to all corners of the world.

As believers, we may face different persecution and opposition to our faith. Remember what Jesus said to His disciples on the last night of His life, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33)." Just as Stephen remained faithful until the end, we are to stand firm in our faith and continue to spread the message of Christ's love and salvation to all who are willing to listen.

Bible Conversations

- Connect Stephen's story to other heroes of the Bible. List some of them and discuss the character traits they possessed and why you would like to have them as your own.
- What are the circumstances of life that most often stimulate strong character development?
- How can we actively participate with God in developing our character, especially during difficult times and trials?
- Identify one character trait that you would like to work on developing in your own life and share why it is important to you. Ask a close friend to pray for your success in this area of your life. Give them the freedom to hold you accountable.