

## **Abide with Us – Part 4**

*Acts 6:1-7:2; 7:52-60*

**1. Stephen's selection and service.**

**2. Stephen's sermon.**

**3. Stephen's sight.**

**4. Stephen's sacrifice.**

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## **Abide With Us<sup>1</sup>**

### **Acts 6:8-7:60**

Tertullian is an ancient church father from the mid-second century – during some of the fiercest persecution of the Church. He said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” That was proven true in the early church as it spread and grew in places of great persecution. It has proven true down through the ages and is still true today. The church grows fastest in the places where she is persecuted and martyred the most.

When we hear about martyrs, we might think of either the ancient history of the church or modern day fanatics, so we might not talk much about the martyrs of the church. But it is important to remember those great saints who gave their lives for Christ. There is something powerful in remembering the stories of those who took to heart the message of laying down their lives and taking on the power of the resurrection.

Our Scripture passage from this week’s Lenten devotional launches us right into the middle of that memory as we remember the first martyr, Stephen, and the faithfulness of God in the midst of it all.

I’d like to read portions of the passage to you, from Acts 6 and 7. I’m not going to invite you to stand because it’s a very long passage, but let’s take a moment of quiet to please prepare your heart and mind to receive God’s Word. *(pause)* This is what the Scripture says:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, *(and four other guys whose names are hard to pronounce!)* ~~Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas,~~ and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well

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Sources include: Michael O'Neill, *Life From the Book of Acts Part Eight: Owned*, West Valley Church, 7/21/2013.

as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia--who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! (Acts 6:1-7:2, niv)

So at this point, Stephen launches into a sermon, recounting the history of the Jewish people, reminding them of God's faithfulness through the generations despite their faithlessness, and showing them how, through it all, God was pointing them to Jesus Christ and what he would do for them, and how God wasn't confined to one building or place. But they weren't getting it; they continued to violently reject God's attempts to reach them. It is an incredible sermon – we won't take the time to read it all, but I would encourage you to do so on your own. So let's pick it up at the end of Stephen's sermon and see what happened from there:

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him--you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. 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 (*meaning, he died*). (Acts 7:52-60, niv)

This is the Word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

There is obviously a great deal going on in this, but if nothing else, by looking at the story of the Church's first martyr, we'll learn to appreciate the cost that some have paid, and be challenged to consider our own level of commitment to Christ. So let's start by looking at...

## **1. Stephen's selection and service.**

The church was growing by the thousands as a result of being courageous enough to pursue God's priorities. But with this growth, as is always the case, there came some challenges. If you look at verse one, you see it says that as they were growing, there was a group of believers that began to complain about the distribution of food. As the church grew, there was a growing need for specialized ministries, and one of those was a ministry to widows. In those days, unless a widow remarried, she had little or no support financially. If she had become a Christian, she would've been cut off from her Jewish family. So the church needed to raise funds to support this ministry to widows.

Notice that it says people were complaining. Your Bible might say they were "murmuring." The literal word is "buzzing," which is a word picture. The picture is of those irritating, distracting, sometimes stinging bees that hover around you. We learned during our four-year partnership with the church in Guyana that they have black wasps there that are this big (about three inches). They're called horse killers or spider wasps. They can kill tarantulas. Let me tell you, you hear those things coming and I'm told when they sting it really hurts. That's the word picture we get about these complaining Christians. In other words, their complaining was not a nicely written note placed in the suggestion box; they were non-stop whining and griping. It was painful.

Notice too that it says these were Hellenistic or Grecian Jews complaining about Hebraic Jews. Here's what that means: Both groups were Jews who had become Christians. The Hebraic Jews were Hebrew speaking Jews. In other words, they were born and raised Jews, who had now become Christians. The Grecian Jews were Greeks who had at some point converted to Judaism and now had become Christians. They were not pure-breeds like the Hebrews. So there was some sinful politics going on. The Hebraic Jewish Christians thought they were superior and so they were neglecting, or not giving the same amounts, to the Grecian widows in need. So you've got one side thinking they are superior, and you've got another side griping and complaining about it. Neither side were handling things appropriately. There was conflict and disunity. But the church *must* have unity. Unity becomes more precious when you walk through conflict in order to reach it. So look at the ingenious politics of the Apostles. This shows real Godly wisdom. They tell the disciples to choose from among themselves seven leaders. And when you look at the names of the seven, including Stephen, there's something you might not notice: by their names, they were all Greek. That was smart! The Apostles realized that the Greeks needed to have their own leadership so they could be well represented. So they said, "Choose from among yourselves..." – they told them basically to quit complaining and do something. It proved to be a stroke of Godly wisdom and sanctified church politics. This is politics done right. Because it not only addressed a need, it raised up Godly leaders. The word that is used there is "diakonos" which we get the word "deacon" from, which means "overseer." And notice it says they were to wait on tables...the tables were the places that offerings were received, counted, and then distributed. "Waiting on tables" was literally dealing with the finances and administration of the ministry, and distribution of resources to the widows. Let's hone in on Stephen: Stephen's willingness to serve people and the Lord, and the power of his ministry is a clear indication of the kind of character this young Christian had. Did you see the descriptions that are listed for Stephen? He was full of wisdom and of the Spirit. In the roll call in verse 5, it is interrupted to say he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Verse 8 tells us that Stephen specifically is "a man full of God's grace and

power” who does “great wonders and signs among the people.” According to verse 10, Stephen had the ability to preach with the power of the Holy Spirit, which made it challenging for his opponents to effectively argue with him. Stephen’s ability to perform wonders places him on the level of the apostles as a true follower of Christ, but because he proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, he is considered a blasphemer by the Jewish religious leaders who have rejected the way of Jesus. Stephen is arrested on false charges, which if you think about it, is ironic because he is accused of being a false prophet *by those who are* bearing false witness.

Something else that is helpful to know is that the Greco-Roman era placed a high value on people who were skilled at rhetoric and debate. Some people were paid to travel as orators to perform rhetoric in various cities. Apparently having a member of the new Christian church be skilled in Greek and Roman rhetoric was also upsetting to the Jewish religious leaders. For all these reasons and more, they arrest Stephen.

So now let’s look at...

## **2. Stephen’s sermon.**

After Stephen is arrested and brought to stand trial before the Sanhedrin, he is described as having “the face of an angel” (6:15), which is written to tell us about Stephen’s innocence and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. So Stephen preaches a sermon that recounts the history of God’s people. Even as he invokes the heroes of the Jewish faith (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs of Israel, and Moses), his emphasis is on God’s faithfulness.

In the first seven chapters of Acts we see two powerful sermons – the one by Peter in Acts two and Stephen’s sermon here. It’s important for us to see the contrast between the results of these two sermons. When Peter finished, the crowd responded with repentance and faith. When Stephen finished, the crowd responded by dragging him outside the city and killing him. As far as we know, no one accepted his message that day. In fact, Acts 8:1 says, “On that day (*of Stephen’s stoning*) a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem.” It doesn’t seem fair! Peter’s message led to mass conversion, while Stephen’s led to mass persecution. Stephen’s sermon was kind of like the pastor who was standing at the back of the church after the Sunday morning service shaking hands with the worshippers as they left. As one man shook hands, he looked intently at the pastor and said, “You preach powerful sermons, Pastor. Thoughtful, well researched. I can always see myself in them...and I want you to knock it off.” Basically that’s what happened to Stephen on a much more deadly scale.

As a result of Peter’s sermon, he surfaced as the preeminent leader of the early church. As a result of Stephen’s sermon, Stephen didn’t surface – he ended up six feet under the surface.

Although there are all kinds of details we could examine in Stephen’s sermon, we want to make note especially of what he said in verses 51–53, where he condemns the Jewish religious leaders, calling them idolatrous and accusing them of committing the same sins as their ancestors—instead of seeing where God is at work, they have created their own gods

for themselves, and instead of listening to the prophets, they have killed the prophets, including Christ.

We don't know whether Stephen *intended* to end his sermon here, or if he so enraged the Sanhedrin that they interrupted him before he was finished, but one thing is clear: they are furious with him.

Which is when we are told about...

### **3. Stephen's sight.**

Stephen has this amazing sight – this vision which inspires believers and infuriates the religious leaders. In verse 55, Stephen is described as being full of the Holy Spirit and having a vision of the glory of God in heaven, and Jesus standing at God's right hand. Verse 56 says Stephen spoke his vision out loud. Once again, this vision demonstrates Stephen's innocence. He is empowered by the Holy Spirit and has not lied about his knowledge of Christ, even though his enemies falsely accused him of teaching things that oppose God.

When this happened for Stephen, it seems to have set a pattern. Multiple narratives about martyrs who came after Stephen have included descriptions of Spirit-empowered visions that reveal their Spirit-filled character.

In the mid-fifteen hundreds, a Christian scholar by the name of John Foxe set out to write a detailed and extensive book collecting the stories of believers who had been martyred for their faith. After Foxe died, others added to his annals, and many similar books have been written since then that give us a roll call of those who have willingly paid the ultimate price for their faith. Their stories are compelling, courageous, inspirational, and tragic – just like Stephen's story. And just like Stephen's, they describe being Spirit-filled and seeing similar sights.

For example, Blandina, a young female martyr in the second century, was martyred along with her friends by the emperor Marcus Aurelius. She was bound to a stake, mirroring the image of a cross, and wild beasts were set on her. While being restrained on the stake, Blandina began to pray passionately for her companions (who I'll mention in a minute), and she prayed for her captors. According to legend, the beasts never touched her, and she was removed from the stake and thrown back in jail. After enduring this for a number of days, in an effort to persuade her to recant, she was led into the arena to see the sufferings of her companions. Finally, as the last of the martyrs, she was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate, enclosed in a net, and thrown before a wild steer, which tossed her into the air with his horns. In the end, she was killed with a dagger.<sup>2</sup> Blandina was viewed with awe by witnesses at the power and strength given to her by the Holy Spirit.

Now, her friends: Perpetua was martyred at the same time as Blandina. She wrote of various visions she had while in prison awaiting her death.

From the Website, *Voice of the Martyrs*, we read of Perpetua and Felicity, who were both killed in the arena. I'll read what is written: "Perpetua bravely held Felicity in her arms,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blandina>

anticipating their death together as sisters in Christ. The bull's horns had already wounded Felicity, and the crowd wanted the coup de grace. Then, abruptly, and inexplicably, the bull stood still. The crowd hushed. This animal was not following the script. Now the crowd let loose with demands for blood, and gladiators rushed forward to finish the work. Felicity died quickly. When Perpetua's executioner hesitated, she encouraged him to do what he needed to do, as his blade was driven into her body.

The Coliseum had never before seen such a spectacle. Perpetua came from a wealthy family. Her father was pagan, but her mother and brothers were Christians. Perpetua had a nursing baby at the time of her arrest for confessing Christ. Her father urged her to renounce faith, for his sake and for her family. Even Roman authorities urged her to offer a simple sacrifice to Roman power. She refused. She would not renounce Christ as Lord, claiming that the name that belonged to her was the name of a Christian.

Felicity was a slave—and pregnant. Since Roman law prohibited the execution of pregnant women, sentence was delayed. Felicity gave birth in prison to a baby girl that would be adopted by Christians after her death. When prison guards wondered how Felicity would handle facing beasts in the arena, especially so soon after her child's birth, she responded, "Now my sufferings are only mine. But when I face the beasts there will be another who will live in me, and will suffer for me since I shall be suffering for Him."

These two women from different classes showed fortitude, determination, and, remarkably, even joy at the prospects of public humiliation and suffering. Several times they refused offers of acquittal and ignored pleas to save themselves. Together they clung to heavenly hope, and to each other, for endurance through the ordeal. Rather than acquiesce to Roman demands, they asked to be baptized while in prison. Perpetua stated, "The dungeon is to me a palace." Amazingly, when Perpetua was told beasts would devour her, she and her companions returned to prison in high spirits at the prospect of death for the glory of God. Three men imprisoned with them were forced to run the gladiator gauntlet: two were killed by beasts; one was beheaded.

As for Perpetua, she was the picture of poise in the center of chaos and blood. When the bull tossed her but did not hurt her, Perpetua's hair came undone. She asked to be allowed to put her hair up because undone hair was a sign of mourning, but this was a day for triumph and joy.

All of the martyrs' bodies were left unburied and guarded by soldiers.

Such courage made a mark on the Romans. These three women and Christians had stood together and died together. Several spectators converted to Christianity as a result, including the governor of Rome."<sup>3</sup>

These are just a few examples of thousands, and stories of martyrs are repeated over and over down through the ages to this very day – martyrs who saw the glory of God and testified to it, and the witnesses who were in awe of the Holy Spirit's presence in those moments.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.persecution.com/stories/stories-of-christian-martyrs-perpetua-felicity-and-blandina/?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlalQobChMIzb2rzlLohAMVFjytBh3\\_5AF3EAAAYASAAEgl81PD\\_BwE](https://www.persecution.com/stories/stories-of-christian-martyrs-perpetua-felicity-and-blandina/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlalQobChMIzb2rzlLohAMVFjytBh3_5AF3EAAAYASAAEgl81PD_BwE)

Those who were martyred believed wholeheartedly that they were joining in Christ's death in order to obtain the resurrection of the dead, and Stephen was no exception.

Stephen trusts that God is with him and that his faithfulness and death will not be in vain.

The life of the early church can be linked directly to the faithful witness of martyrs. Many who witnessed the supernatural strength of the martyrs were inspired to seek God, which made the church grow and spread.

So what do we make of...

#### **4. Stephen's sacrifice?**

The Jewish religious leaders were angry at Stephen's steadfast words about the hope of Christ, so they covered their ears and made noise in order to ignore the words, no doubt to harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit's conviction. Enraged, they organized themselves to kill him on the spot by throwing large stones at him until he died. In order to have better aim, they took off their coats and lay their coats at Saul's feet. Saul – the Jewish priest who instigated the whole thing. Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul. Many scholars believe this moment is the beginning of Saul's conversion experience, which culminated in a dramatic moment on the road to Damascus—while he was on a journey with the express purpose of carrying out more persecutions against Christians (see Acts 9:1–19). It is possible that witnessing the Holy Spirit in Stephen during his stoning is the beginning of Saul feeling a stirring in his heart toward Christ.

As a result, Saul became Paul, and the Lord used him to reach the Gentile world with the Good News. How many of you this morning are Jews? We are Gentile Christians. That means every one of us who is a Christian owes our salvation lineage to the work of Paul, converted to Christ because of the life and martyrdom of Stephen, because it was his death that had such a profound impression on Paul which led to the Gospel being given to you and me.

At the very moment of his death, Stephen asks God to forgive his persecutors, reminding us of Jesus' prayer of forgiveness from the cross. Stephen knows he is joining Christ in his death and has hope of resurrection.

This hope of resurrection was true of many (if not all) Christian martyrs. They were able to face their deaths bravely because of this hope. So they didn't think they were abandoning children or leaving important business unfinished. They were becoming who they were *meant to be* through the death and resurrection of Christ.

So what does all this mean for us today?

Martyrdom is our collective faith history. Looking at the faithfulness of past Christians gives us resurrection hope in our present. Most of us won't face stoning or the brutal trials of the Roman games in the Colosseum, but we all face hardship of some kind. The stories of the martyrs remind us that there is hope in the midst of our hardship.

Remembering the martyrs can also help us put our own hardship in perspective. Sometimes we want to act like we are being martyred when we encounter difficulties, but



martyrs did not claim any privilege or power except the power of the Holy Spirit in them. They also did not *seek* death, but received it as a consequence of their witness to Christ, and they laid down their lives in obedience and faithfulness.

Sometimes today we get hung up on discussions over the death of the church, or the hardships the church faces in the world, but ultimately these things should only remind us of our Christian proclamation that death leads to resurrection. The blood of the martyrs led to the spread of the church. Their deaths brought about resurrection hope. Often what we perceive as death today is actually an opportunity for resurrection power to be revealed.

Our ambition, inspired by Stephen, is for our entire lives to be lived in service to Christ. Christ comes first before anything and everything. We must yield ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit within us, letting our lives be a living witness – a living sacrifice – for Christ to God’s glory. Then, whenever possible, we get to tell people about who Jesus is and the transforming work he’s done in our lives. We get to tell people Who the source of our character and power is, the reason for our hope in the hardship, the reason for our joy in the journey, the reason for our glory in grief. Living *that* kind of life is our witness, and gives us a platform to introduce people to Jesus.

And here’s the thing: we think the meaning of the word “martyr” is death, or to be put to death for our faith. But the word martyr comes from the Latin and Greek word *martus* – which means “witness.” It’s the word that was used to describe someone who spoke what they saw and knew. It would be used of a person who testifies in a legal proceeding. It is used of someone whose life and words tells others about Jesus. Here’s the point, and listen carefully: they were witnesses *before* they were murdered. They were not witnesses *because* they were martyred; *they were martyred because they were witnesses. (repeat)* Would you be?

Lent is a season when we step into the meanings of death, grief, and lament. We face hardship head on. Like the martyrs of the church, the reason we can face those things is we have what Hebrews call “that great cloud of witnesses” cheering us on – we remember the faithfulness of generations of Christians who gave their lives before us, and trust in the hope of resurrection. So we find the same courage and strength when we face hardship, knowing the Holy Spirit is with us too. And we are determined to be witnesses, introducing others to Jesus Christ with our lives and our words. No. Matter. The. Cost.

*Prayer*

*Benediction:*

1 Corinthians 15:55-58

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.