

CHAPTER 4

The First Christian Martyr

(Acts 6-7)

Stephen Chosen to Help Care for Needy Widows

The apostles continued to teach and preach Jesus Christ (Acts 5:42) and God continued to save all those who believed this good news. The church was rapidly increasing in numbers: "the number of the disciples was M _____" (Acts 6:1).

We do not know exactly how many believers there were at this time. At an earlier time the number was given at about _____ thousand men (see Acts 4:4; this probably does not include women and children). Later we are told that more believers were added to the Lord, M _____ both of men and women (Acts 5:14). As we come to Acts chapter 6 there must have been many thousands of believers (perhaps ten thousand or more). How many believers are there in your church?

With so many people we are not surprised to learn that a problem developed. This Jerusalem church was made up of two groups of people. There were Greek Jews and there were Hebrew Jews. The Hebrew Jews spoke Hebrew (or Aramaic) and the Bible that they used was the Hebrew Old Testament. The twelve Apostles were Hebrew Jews. The Greek Jews spoke Greek and followed Greek customs. The Bible they used was the Old Testament which had been translated into Greek (called the *Septuagint*). This was really the same Bible as the Hebrew Bible, except it had been translated into the Greek language which was the common language of the Roman empire.

The Greek Jews began to complain about the Hebrew Jews because the Greek widows were being neglected and were getting less help than the Hebrew widows. A **widow** is a woman whose husband is dead and who has not married again. Since the widows did not have husbands to care for them and meet their needs, the church wanted to do what it could to help them (see James 1:27; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3). But for some reason the Hebrew widows were getting more help than the Greek widows.

The men who were in charge of meeting the needs of the widows were the twelve apostles. This was a job that was becoming too big for them to handle. Suppose your Pastor were given the following jobs: clean the church, cut the grass in the spring and summer, shovel the snow in the winter, count the money, pay the bills, visit people in the hospital every day, visit someone in the church every evening, drive a school bus every morning and work in a factory five days every week. Would he have much time to pray? Would he have much time to study the Bible? Would he have much time to preach?

If the devil could get the apostles to stop praying and stop preaching God's Word, then he would win a major victory. The apostles would be so busy trying to take care of the needy widows that they would have little time for anything else. The apostles recognized this problem. They did not want to leave the W _____ of G _____ (Acts 6:2). They wanted to give themselves continually to _____ and to the ministry of the _____ (Acts 6:4). You can pray that your Pastor will spend most of his time doing these same two things.

Even though the Apostles wanted to give themselves to prayer and to God's Word, they were still concerned about the widows. They decided to choose _____ men (Acts 6:3) who would be in charge of taking care of the widows.

The names of these seven men are given in Acts 6:5. What name is given first on this list? _____ He is described as "a man full of F _____ and of the H _____ Spirit" (Acts 6:5). He believed what God said, and he allowed God the Holy Spirit to control his life and work in and through him! In Acts 6:8 we are told that Stephen was full of _____ and P _____. God was working mightily in this man. God enabled Stephen to perform amazing miracles, even as the apostles had done (Acts 6:8 and compare Acts 5:12-16).

Did the number of believers continue to increase (Acts 6:7)? _____

Stephen is Accused by the Jews

In Acts 6:9 we learn that Stephen went into the synagogue to talk with the Jewish people about Christ. Synagogues were places where Jews assembled together for prayer and for the reading of the Scriptures. In the synagogues the Scriptures were read, taught and discussed.

The Jews in the synagogue discussed the Scriptures with Stephen and argued with him (Acts 6:9), but they were not able to resist (stand against) the _____ and the spirit by which he spoke (Acts 6:10). Where did Stephen get such wisdom (compare Luke 21:15)?

_____ God always wins every argument! (Note: According to Acts 6:9, some of these Jews were from Cilicia. Who else was from Cilicia according to Acts 21:39?)

_____ Perhaps Paul was one of the Jews who was arguing with Stephen, although we do not know this for sure.

The Jews of the synagogue stopped arguing with Stephen, and began accusing him and saying that he was teaching the wrong things. They said that Stephen was speaking against Moses (against the law), against God and against the Holy Temple (Acts 6:11,13,14). These were the three things that the Jews held most dear! Anyone who was against God, against the Law of Moses, and against the Temple was an enemy of the Jewish people. Stephen was not really against these things. The real problem was that those who accused him were AGAINST CHRIST! Jesus once said, "he that is not _____ Me is _____ Me" (Matthew 12:30). Stephen was with Christ and for Christ, but the Jews were against Christ. This was the real problem!

Because of the false things that were said about Stephen, the people were stirred up against him (Acts 6:12). Before this most of the people had respected the believers and had been favorable towards them (see Acts 4:21; 5:13; 5:26). But now the unsaved Jews were beginning to turn against them.

Finally Stephen was brought before the Jewish leaders. As the Jewish leaders looked at Stephen they "saw his face as it had been the face of an _____" (Acts 6:15). Stephen's face was aglow (glowing) because of God's wonderful presence. Everyone else seemed to be against Stephen but God was with him in a wonderful way!

Stephen Preaches a Powerful Message

God tells every believer to "be R _____ always to give an _____ to every man that asketh you a reason of the _____ that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). When the leader of the Jews (the High Priest) asked Stephen a question (Acts 7:1), was Stephen ready with an answer (Acts 7:2)? _____ In fact, his answer was 52 verses long!

Stephen's answer came right from the Old Testament Scriptures. In this powerful message, Stephen spoke of God; he spoke of Moses and the law; he spoke of the temple (the three things he had been accused of being against). At the end of his message he spoke about Christ, the "J _____ O _____" (the righteous One--see Acts 7:52). This great sermon shows that Stephen really knew his Bible well (the Old Testament Scriptures). How well do you know your Bible? If your friends were to ask you questions about God, heaven, hell, salvation, death, etc., would you be able to give them correct answers from the Bible?

At the end of this message, Stephen began to accuse his accusers, and Stephen's accusations were true. He said three things which really made them angry:

1. **YOU ARE AGAINST GOD (Acts 7:51).**
2. **YOU HAVE BETRAYED AND MURDERED CHRIST (Acts 7:52).**
3. **YOU HAVE BROKEN GOD'S LAW (Acts 7:53).**
(You are sinners!)

Stephen is Stoned by the Angry Mob

Were the Jews delighted and pleased with the things Stephen had said (Acts 7:54)? _____ The Bible says that they were CUT (Acts 7:54). They were deeply cut, not by a knife, not by a scissors, not by a razor blade, but by a special kind of sword! What was the sword that cut them (Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17)?

If Stephen had **looked around** he would have seen angry faces of men who wanted to kill him so that he would never preach again. Stephen did not look around. Instead he just L _____ U _____ (Acts 7:55). Who did he see (Acts 7:55)?

_____ God gave Stephen a wonderful glimpse of his Saviour!

Did the Jews want to hear Stephen say anything else (Acts 7:57)? _____ These angry men ran upon him, threw him out of the city and _____ him (Acts 7:58). In his message Stephen had accused these Jews of being M _____ (Acts 7:52). Did they prove that Stephen was correct in saying this? _____

Stoning is a terrible form of death. Stones are thrown at the victim until finally he dies. Several times the Jews wanted to stone the Lord Jesus Christ (see John 8:59; 10:31 and compare John 5:18). Read John 15:18-21 and John 16:1-3. How do these verses apply to Stephen?

As Stephen was about to die, what did he pray (Acts 7:60)? (Circle the correct answer)

- a. "Lord, destroy these wicked murderers!"
- b. "Lord, judge them and pay them back for this wicked deed!"
- c. "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."
- d. "Lord, punish them. They really deserve it!"

Who else prayed for His enemies as He was being put to death (Luke 23:34)?

Immediately after Stephen prayed this prayer, he F_____ A_____ (Acts 7:60), which means he died physically. When a believer dies, does he lose or does he gain (Philippians 1:21)? _____ When Stephen died, he went to be W_____ C_____ which is _____ (Philippians 1:23). At the moment of death, Stephen was absent from the _____ but present with the _____ (2 Corinthians 5:8). Was Stephen faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10)? _____ What did God promise him (Revelation 2:10)? _____

Stephen is the First of Many Martyrs

Stephen was the first Christian who died for his faith. In Acts 22:20 the Bible speaks of the blood of God's M_____ Stephen. Stephen was God's martyr. The word "martyr" means "a witness" and in this case it means someone who is a witness for Christ even unto death. Stephen was a faithful witness for Christ even though it cost him his life.

Other martyrs followed Stephen. In Acts chapter 12 we will learn about the first apostle who was martyred. History tells us that Peter and Paul were also put to death because of their faith in Christ. In the first 250 years of the church, hundreds of Christians were put to death by the Romans. Some were even fed to the lions in Roman coliseums as spectators watched (much the same as people go to watch football games today for entertainment). Do you think that today there are many believers who are being persecuted, imprisoned and put to death because of their faith? Do you thank God that you live in a free country?

There is a well known expression which says, "**The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.**" Believers would die, but other believers were saved through their testimony, and the church continued to grow. The more the church was persecuted, the more the church seemed to grow! Many of the Christians were good witnesses as they were dying, as was true in the case of Stephen. Some believers even sang hymns as they were burned in the flames (such as John Huss, who was burned at the stake in 1415). Others prayed like Stephen. Those who watched knew that something was different about these people, and some of those who watched put their faith in Christ also.

When Stephen died, there was a seed that was planted in the heart of a man who was watching. Who was standing by when God's martyr Stephen was dying (Acts 22:20)? _____ Paul was also called by what other name (Acts 13:9)? _____ Was Saul present when Stephen was being stoned (Acts 7:58)? _____ Saul was probably present and listening when Stephen gave his powerful message, and Stephen's words must have pierced his heart too. The seed was planted and at a later time (as we will see in the next chapter) Saul (Paul) would be saved and would become one of the greatest preachers of all time. Even though Stephen was dead, Paul and others would take his place and tell the world about a wonderful Saviour who had risen from the dead!

Today all of the early Christians are dead, and many of them died as brave martyrs. How are people going to hear the good news of salvation today? Is Stephen going to preach to them? Is Paul going to preach to them? **Who** will carry on the work that the early Christians began?
WILL YOU?