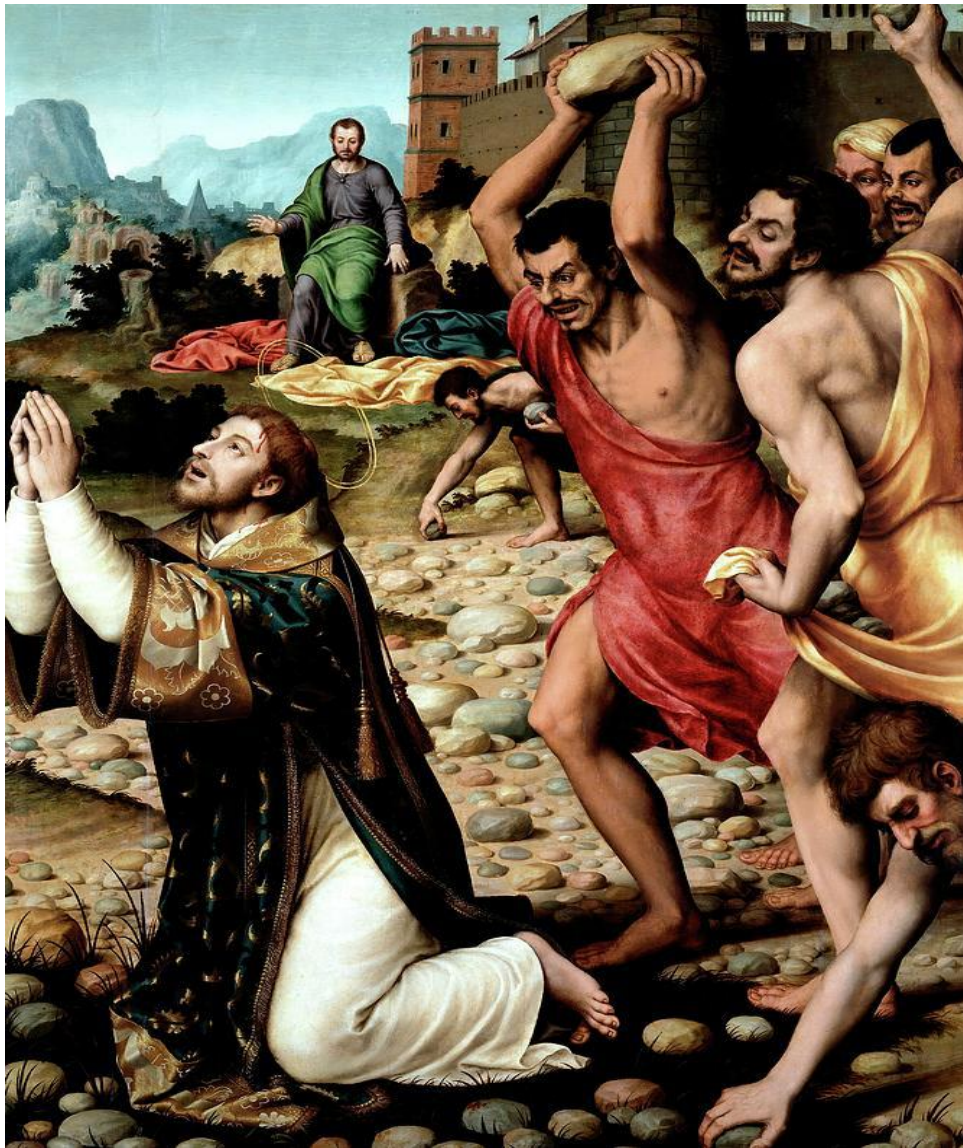


LIVING GODS WILL

The Disciple

STEPHEN



Martyrdom of Saint Stephen by Juan de Juanes

The Disciple **STEPHEN**

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Born: 5 AD

Died: 34 AD (aged 29), Jerusalem, Judaea

Death: Stoned to death by the Sanhedrin

Stephen was the first disciple of **Jesus** to be martyred

Saul (**Paul**) approved of **Stephen's** killing and watched

Acts 6:5 introduces a faithful man of God named **Stephen**: "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

It is noteworthy that there have always been those faithful believers whose love for and commitment to the **Lord** seem to shine through so greatly that others around them notice, and **Stephen** was such a man.

Nothing is known about the personal life of **Stephen**—his parents, his siblings, or whether he had a wife or children; however, what is known about him is what is truly important. He was faithful, even when faced with certain death.

Stephen was one of the **seven men chosen** to be responsible over the distribution of food to widows in the early church after a dispute arose and the apostles recognized they needed help.

He was also "full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people" (**Acts 6:8**). Opposition arose, but the men who argued with **Stephen** were no match for the wisdom given him by the **Holy Spirit**. So, the men decided to falsely accuse **Stephen**, labeling him a blasphemer and having him arrested (**Acts 6:11-14**).

Acts 7 is the record of **Stephen's** testimony, which is perhaps the most detailed and concise history of Israel and their relationship to **God** of any in Scripture.

Stephen was not concerned about his earthly existence, determining instead to stand firmly on the side of **Jesus Christ**, no matter the consequences. God inspired him to speak boldly, rightly accusing Israel of their failure to recognize **Jesus**, their Messiah, rejecting and murdering Him, as they had murdered **Zechariah** and other prophets and faithful men throughout their generations.

Stephen's speech was an indictment against Israel and their failure as the chosen people of **God** who had been given the law, the holy things, and the promise of the Messiah. Naturally, these accusations, though true, were not well received by the Jews.

In his speech, **Stephen** reminded them of their faithful patriarch, **Abraham**, and how God had led him from a pagan land into the land of Israel, where He made a **covenant** with him.

He spoke of the journey of his people, through **Joseph's** sojourn in Egypt to their deliverance by **Moses** 400 years later. He brought to mind how **Moses** had met **God** in the wilderness of Midian in a burning bush, and he explained how **God** had empowered **Moses** to lead His people from idolatry and slavery to freedom and times of refreshing in the Promised Land.

Throughout his speech, he repeatedly reminded them of their continual rebellion and idolatry, in spite of the mighty works of **God** to which they were eyewitnesses, thereby accusing them with their own history, which only irritated them until they did not want to hear any more.

The law of **Moses** states that the sin of blasphemy deserves a **death sentence**, usually **by stoning (Numbers 15:30-36)**.

Just before these arrogant, unredeemed Jews followed the prescribed penalty and began stoning **Stephen, Acts 7:55-56** records his final moments of earthly life, just before he stepped through the veil between heaven and earth:

"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.'"

The words of **Colossians 3:2-3** could have been written about the life of **Stephen**, even though they are applicable to all believers: **"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."**

Stephen's life—and even more so his death—should be an example of how every believer should strive to live:

1. committed to the **Lord** even in the face of death
2. faithful to preach the gospel boldly
3. knowledgeable of **God's** truth
4. willing to be used by **God** for His plan and purpose

Stephen's testimony still stands as a beacon, a light to a lost and dying world, as well as an accurate history of the children of **Abraham**.

The difference in **Stephen's** case was that **Stephen** did not have an extensive history of antagonizing the Jewish religious leaders. **Stephen** was a relative unknown, and his stoning was not likely to attract any attention from Rome.

The crowd who actually killed **Stephen** could always be blamed for taking matters into their own hands, without the official sanction of the Sanhedrin. And, given Pilate's growing political weakness, there was little chance he would respond to an incident of mob justice, from the Jews, against a Jew.

Beyond that, **Stephen's** sermon seems to have so infuriated the crowd that it's possible nobody was thinking logically (**Acts 7:54, 57**).

The long and short of it is that the Jewish religious leaders did not have the legal right to exact the death penalty. However, Rome's interest in enforcing that rule was subject to many factors, not the least of which was whether or not the incident was—in Rome's view—worth pursuing.

The stoning of **Stephen** by the Jews was technically illegal, but the Romans had no vested interest in the matter, and the temple leaders in Jerusalem rightly felt that Rome would not respond.

Jesus, on the other hand, had caught the attention of many powerful people, and the Jews would not venture to violate Roman law by executing **Jesus** on their own.

Thus castigated, the account is that the crowd could contain their anger no longer. However, **Stephen** looked up and cried, "**Look! I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God!**"

He said that the recently executed **Jesus** was standing by the side of God. (**Acts 7:54**) The people from the crowd, who threw the first stones, laid their coats down so as to be able to do this, at the feet of a "**young man named Saul**" (later known as Paul the Apostle).

Stephen prayed that the Lord would receive his spirit and his killers be forgiven, sank to his knees, and "**fell asleep**" (**Acts 7:58-60**).

Saul "**approved of their killing him**".(**Acts 8:1**) In the aftermath of **Stephen's** death, the remaining disciples fled to distant lands, many to Antioch.(**Acts 11:19-20**)

Stephen was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin just outside the Jerusalem city wall in AD 34. He was 29 years old.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:59 And they stoned **Stephen** as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Acts 6:8 And **Stephen**, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Acts 8:2 And devout men carried **Stephen** to his burial, and made great lamentation over him.

Saint Stephen's Gate, Jerusalem
Site of the Stoning of the Disciple Stephen



St. Stephen Accused of Blasphemy by Juan de Juanes