

# HONORING THE FIRST MARTYRS

That Christians have been slaughtered solely for their Faith, even present day, is undeniably accurate. The horrific deaths of first century followers of "The Way" is well documented in both Christian and secular circles. These souls were known as "The First Martyrs," as they did precisely what they professed they would do when they first became Ambassadors for Jesus Christ (1). They gave their life for Him without compromising their beliefs, which were based upon His teachings now recorded in the Holy Bible (2).

As a result of the ultimate selflessness displayed by the First Martyrs, many eternally unanswered questions - some personally challenging- come about: What would have happened had these courageous souls decided NOT to stand in the gap for Jesus Christ when Truth was on the line? Would Christianity have survived?

## Stephen: Exemplification of Martyrdom

### First Christian Martyr

Stephen is traditionally considered the first martyr of Christianity, having been stoned to death by the religious leaders of his time under the false charges of blasphemy. Fittingly for the first Martyr for Jesus Christ, Stephen's charges mirror those leveled against his Savior only just a few years earlier ([Matthew 26:65](#), [Mark 14:63-64](#), [Luke 5:21](#)).

### Early Church Leader

Leaning on the infallible, God-breathed Holy Scriptures as our guide, the Acts of the Apostles [chapter 6](#) tells us that Stephen, a Deacon in the early church at Jerusalem, was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" ([v 5](#)) and "a man full of God's grace and power, (who) performed great wonders and signs among the people" ([v 8](#)). But trouble began with the "Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom (3) the Spirit (4) gave him as he spoke" ([v 9-10](#)).

### Seized for Speaking Truth

Furious at being bested by Stephen's Holy Spirit-filled demeanor, this cowardly brood of vipers went on to persuade others in saying, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." They stirred up the religious hornet's nest, so to speak, which included the teachers and elders of the Mosaic Law. Stephen was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin, once again paralleling the Six Trials of Jesus Christ (5) just a few short years before.

<http://www.downriverdisciples.com/the-first-martyrs>

## Speech Before the Sanhedrin

Now testifying before the Sanhedrin ([Acts 7:1-53](#)), Stephen delivered what was undoubtedly a passionate, un-faithfully accurate account of Old Testament (5) biblical titans to include- but not limited to- Abraham (God appeared to him in Mesopotamia -see [Genesis 12](#)- indicating that God does not dwell in one particular building, meaning the Temple- [Acts 7:48-50](#)); and Moses (God appeared to him as a Burning Bush- see [Exodus 3](#)- again offering Scriptural evidence that God is not contained to a specific structure or place). Stephen also highlighted Israel's historical disobedience to God as, after He had freed them from 400 years of Egyptian slavery, they turned to other gods while Moses was communing with God ([Exodus 32](#)).

These factual references did not sit well with the Sanhedrin, who were very studied in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament (6)).

Stephen, with the power of the Holy Spirit leading him ([Luke 12:11-12](#)), continued on. As he faced two main charges- a) that he had declared that Jesus would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and b) that he had changed the customs of Moses, Stephen appealed to the Jewish Scriptures to prove how the Mosaic Law was not subverted by Jesus but, instead, was being fulfilled.

There is no Scriptural indication that the Sanhedrin rebutted Stephen's discourse.

[Acts 7:51-53](#) shares with us that Stephen admonished the religious leaders for their inability to break free of practices keeping them from being filled with the Holy Spirit. After all, the citizenry counted on these individuals and their ruling authority for spiritual direction and guidance. "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."

This exhortation by Stephen, as truthfully accurate as it was, sealed his fate.

## Stoning and Death

[Acts 7:54-60](#) is crystal clear in describing the religious leaders' response to Stephen's passionate (and Scripturally accurate) pleas. 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."

The religious leaders covered their ears so as not to hear Stephen's words. They began yelling at the top of their voices and rushed at him, dragging Stephen out of the city. Once there, they laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (7) and began stoning Stephen, who 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. Stephen asking his Lord not to "hold this sin against them" mirrors the forgiving actions of Jesus on His Cross (8) when He said, "Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing" ([Luke 23:34](#)).

## **The Church: Persecuted and Scattered**

[Acts 8:1-3](#) tells us that Saul, who later was converted to Christianity by none other than Jesus Christ Himself ([Acts 9](#)) and- as the great Evangelizer, Paul- authored a majority of the New Testament (9), approved of Stephen's killing. Afterward, that same day, "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."

## **Exemplification of a Martyr**

The biblical account of Stephen ([Acts 6:1 - 8:3](#)) discloses to us many treasures of wisdom and truth, first and foremost that he was an unswerving Ambassador for and of Jesus Christ. Stephen emulated his Savior in the performance of Miracles (10), for standing in the gap for Truth ([John 14:6](#)) in the face of adversity (religious and otherwise), for being murdered for his beliefs (11) and for forgiving his executioners (12).

## **Parallels in Death: Jesus and Stephen**

Please see page four for a chart outlining a comparison between the false arrest, prosecution and death of Jesus Christ (Matthew & Luke) to the account of Stephen (Acts of the Apostles).

## PARALLELS IN DEATH: JESUS AND STEPHEN

The chart below draws a comparison between the false arrests, prosecutions and deaths of Jesus Christ (Matthew & Luke) and Stephen (Acts of the Apostles).

JESUS	STEPHEN
<p>Those who had arrested Jesus took Him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. (<a href="#">Matthew 26:57</a>)</p>	<p>So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. (<a href="#">Acts 6:12</a>)</p>
<p>The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put Him to death. (<a href="#">Matthew 26:59</a>)</p>	<p>Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." (<a href="#">Acts 6:11</a>)</p>
<p>But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward... (<a href="#">Matthew 26:60</a>)</p>	<p>They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law." (<a href="#">Acts 6:13</a>)</p>
<p>... and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" (<a href="#">Matthew 26:61</a>)</p>	<p>"For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." (<a href="#">Acts 6:14</a>)</p>
<p>Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" (<a href="#">Matthew 26:62</a>)</p>	<p>Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" (<a href="#">Acts 7:1</a>)</p>
<p>"You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of Heaven." (<a href="#">Matthew 26:64</a>)</p>	<p>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." (<a href="#">Acts 7:55-56</a>)</p>
<p>Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. (<a href="#">Matthew 26:65-66</a>)</p>	<p>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. (<a href="#">Acts 7:57-58</a>)</p>
<p>Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (<a href="#">Luke 23:34</a>)</p>	<p>Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (<a href="#">Acts 7:60</a>)</p>
<p>Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (<a href="#">Luke 23:46</a>)</p>	<p>While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (<a href="#">Acts 7:59</a>)</p>

## What is a "Martyr"?

In Christianity, a Martyr (Greek: μάρτυς, *mártys*, "witness"; stem μάρτυρ-, *mártyr*-), in accordance with the meaning of the original Greek *martys* in the New Testament, is one who brings a testimony, usually written or verbal. In particular, the testimony is that of the Christian Gospel, or more generally, the Word of God. A Christian witness is a biblical witness whether or not death follows. However, over time, many Christian testimonies were rejected, the witnesses were put to death, and the word *martyr* developed its present sense. Where death ensues, the witnesses follow the example of Jesus Christ in offering up their lives for Truth.

[Merriam-Webster](#) defines a Martyr as a) a person who is killed or who suffers greatly for a religion, cause, etc OR b) a person who pretends to suffer or who exaggerates suffering in order to get praise or sympathy.

## Personal Challenge

Present day, Christians are being martyred at an alarming rate. How am I, as a professed follower of The Way, measuring up to my chosen path as I pursue my Crown of Glory ([1 Peter 5:4](#))?

## Reflection on the First Martyrs

Wherever the Good News of Jesus was preached, it met the same opposition as Jesus did, and many of those who began to follow Him shared His suffering and death. But no human force could stop the power of the Spirit unleashed upon the world. The blood of Martyrs has always been, and will always be, the seed of Christians.

(Source <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/firsaint-martyrs-of-the-church-of-rome/>)

## Story Behind the Painting Appearing on The First Martyrs Webpage

William T. Walters commissioned the painting in 1863, but the artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), did not deliver it until 20 years later. In a letter to Walters, Gérôme identified the setting as ancient Rome's racecourse, the Circus Maximus. He noted such details as the goal posts and the chariot tracks in the dirt. The seating, however, more closely resembles that of the Colosseum, Rome's amphitheater, in which gladiatorial combats and other spectacles were held. Similarly, the hill in the background surmounted by a colossal statue and a temple is nearer in appearance to the Athenian Acropolis than it is to Rome's Palatine Hill. The artist also commented on the religious fortitude of the victims who were about to suffer martyrdom either by being devoured by the wild beasts or by being smeared with pitch and set ablaze, which also never took place in the Circus Maximus.

(Source [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThe\\_Christian\\_Martyrs\\_Last\\_Prayer.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThe_Christian_Martyrs_Last_Prayer.jpg))

# FOOTNOTE SOURCES

- (1) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/jesus-christ>
- (2) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/the-good-news>
- (3) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/gifts-of-the-holy-spirit>
- (4) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/the-holy-spirit>
- (5) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/six-trials-of-jesus>
- (6) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/old-testament>
- (7) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/ambassador-in-chains>
- (8) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/obituary-of-jesus>
- (9) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/new-testament>
- (10) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/miracles-of-jesus>
- (11) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/anthem>
- (12) <http://www.downriverdisciples.com/forgiveness>