

The Church's First Martyr

*"And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed,
I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes
of those who were killing him. "*

Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." "

Acts 22:20-21 (NIV)

Stephen, the infant church's first martyr does not have a lot of space given to him in the written history of the early church. However, he stands at a crossroads for the Jewish believers in their relationship to non believing Jews. His story is confined to Acts 6-7 where his speech to the Jews is recorded and also the resulting martyrdom he suffered for his faith in the Lord Jesus.

Stephen was a pioneer in the new work and paid the ultimate price for his witness to Jesus. We have the story of only one day in his life, the last, but he stands as tall as any of the other worthy figures who helped develop the early church.

Stephen heads the list for deacons in Acts 6:5, and he saw his work of serving the church as much more than what we commonly think of as deacons' work today. He preached Christ and the resurrection wonderfully and

confounded his opponents in the great debate.

Then he was dragged before the Jewish council and false witness was made against him. Stephen was so empowered by the Lord that Acts 6:15 (NIV) "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

The remarkable witness that Stephen then gave was full and logical in its orderly presentation. The crowd, knowing they had lost the argument, rushed on him and stoned him to death.

What we learn from this incredible bit of history is that when we come to a difficult situation that demands courage and clear thinking we can count on the amazing grace of God to make us equal to the matter at hand. It says in Deuteronomy 33:25 (NIV) "...your strength will equal your days."

As you read Stephen's short biography you should be inspired to trust the Lord for all the situations you may encounter in life. The Lord has promised to be with His people always (Matthew 28:20). So when we finally come to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not fear anything for He is with us.

Whatever issues you face today go to the Lord in prayer and ask for the spirit of Stephen. As the Lord gave generously to Stephen He shall do the same for you. And, like Stephen, you shall see the hand of the Lord in the trial. You shall have grace to fulfill your mission whatever it happens to be.

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