

Article by Mrs Sheeba Mridula Sagar- 15<sup>th</sup> February 2023

### **Acts 6:1-8, 7:54 to 8:2**

Across the world, the gospel has most often taken root in places prepared by the blood of martyrs. In Acts, after the early church begins to convert thousands of people to the Christian faith in a matter of days.

**Acts 6:5 introduces a faithful man of God named Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”** Stephen, in Greek Stephanos, meaning "wreath, crown, reward, honour, renown, fame".

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.

Chapter 6 of Acts of the Apostles indicates that he was a Hellenist (a foreign-born Jew who spoke Greek). He lived in Jerusalem and had become a Christian.

**Acts 6:1-7:** As the Apostles' numbers grew, because of the size, certain people became overlooked, such as the Gentile widows (opposed to the Hebraic widows). Seeing a need to delegate roles, the disciples elected the first seven deacons known to the Christian faith. These deacons had to “be full of wisdom and the Spirit.” These deacons would take charge of the distribution of food to the widows, among other duties. The disciples chose Stephen, and six others, and prayed over them as they began their ministry.

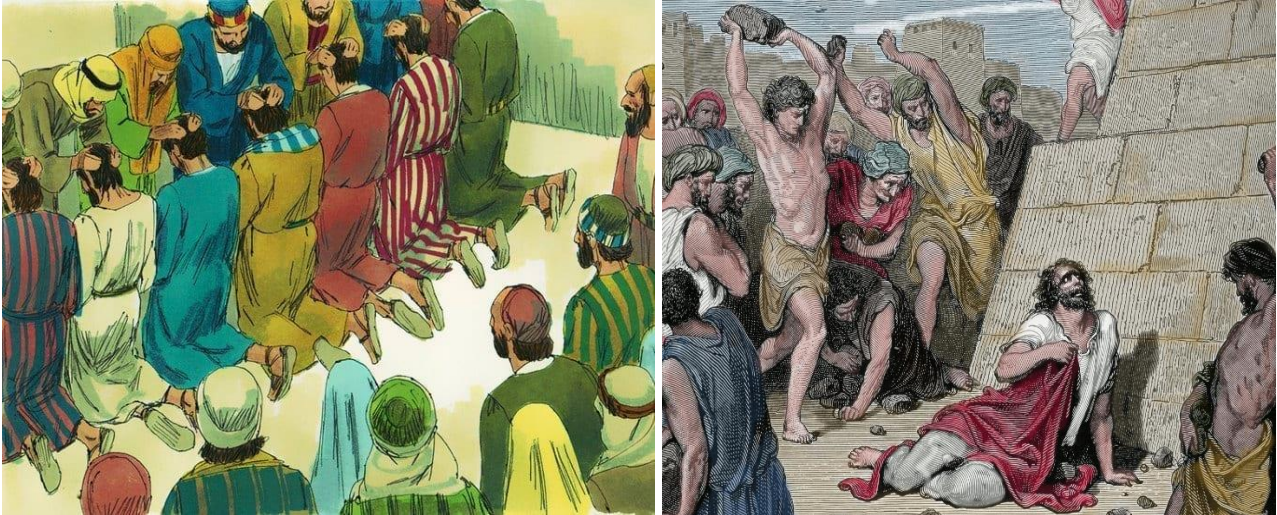
**Acts 6:8:** Throughout the history of the early church, various charismatic gifts such as healing, belonged to several followers of Christ. Probably, Stephen performed various wonders and signs.

**He was likely Jewish:** Jews, from an early age, memorized portions of the Old Testament. They had a strong knowledge of the Scriptures, as seen in Stephen's speech featured in Acts 7.

**He also had Hellenistic roots:** Probably he was a Hellenistic Jew (a foreign-born Jew), which would make sense why the apostles would place him in charge of the distribution of food to the Hellenistic widows. The article above also shows how his Hellenistic and Hebrew upbringing influenced the Apology-like speech he gives to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Many Jews grew up outside of Jerusalem due to an event known as the Diaspora.

Among those who were chosen and ordained, Stephen, became the best known of the seven, was recognized as a man with special gifts as an evangelist. Their desire to serve Christ is translated into the reality of serving others.

Stephen was an effective administrator and messenger before becoming a martyr.



**He was the first deacon and the first Christian martyr.**

- I. **Stephen, besides being a good administrator, was also a powerful speaker.** Stephen was an inspired man when he stood before his opponents and declared to them the words of God. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, as were the apostles on the day of Pentecost. When confronted in the temple by various opposing groups, Stephen's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defence he made before the council. He presented a summary of the Jews' own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners.



Of the numerous speeches in Acts of the Apostles, Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin is the longest.

- **If we go out in Christ's name to speak for Him, the Holy Spirit will always be with us whom no man can withstand. If only we remembered this, it would make us brave and resistless in speaking the truth.**
- II. Stephen's fiery eloquence touched many hearts--but it also aroused the members of the Jewish synagogues, who set themselves against him.

We must not be surprised if our efforts to do good, awaken opposition.

- **The more we try to honour Christ and build up His kingdom, the more opposition we shall encounter.**

When we assault the evil we see in them and openly condemn it--we shall certainly stir up enmity and bring upon ourselves opposition and possibly persecution.

- III. False witnesses were brought to testify against Stephen, to try to convict him, as the rulers had tried to convict Jesus.
- IV. The record says, "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

We know that those who live in God's presence, in the light of God's love, will have shining faces. No doubt Stephen's face shone. The secret of the shine was in his heart. The peace of God was there even amid the enraged enemies glowering upon him, he had no fear--but was kept in perfect peace. Stephen's heart was full of love. Stephen was strong. Even with all the people against him, he had no fear. He was strong in God.

➤ **When God is in a man, filling him--there is no room in him for fear or anger, or for any earthly passion.**

- V. But **he, being full of the Holy Spirit**, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Acts 7:55- 56

Stephen "looked up steadfastly into heaven." That was well. If he had not looked up--he would not have seen the vision of glory, which he now beheld. If he had looked down, probably he would have seen danger and would have been afraid. He looked up and saw not the human rage and fury--but the sweet peace of heaven above him.

➤ **We should train our eyes to *look up-ward*, heaven-ward, God-ward, for, there are our blessings, our goal, our home, God Himself, and all fair and beautiful things.**

- VI. The members of the Sanhedrin lost all self-control, all dignity, and in their rage became an ungoverned mob. They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and, rushing upon Stephen, dragged him out of the courtroom, through the gate, out of the city, and stoned him!

"And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Acts 7:59, 60

Thus the eloquent voice was hushed, so that no more could it be heard on the earth. His life, cut off so suddenly, so violently, when only beginning its usefulness, seems a failure. But it was not a failure. Someone says that Stephen's mission in this world was to deliver only one speech of half an hour. But if his words had reached or

impressed no other life, they fell upon the ears of Saul, the persecutor, and he never forgot them.

**Stephen died, and Saul was converted- a violent persecutor of Christians to being one of the greatest champions of the gospel the church has known.** Stephen's preaching was stopped--but Saul was called to take up his unfinished work.

VII. They stoned him to death while he prayed for their forgiveness. Stephen's dying prayers were like Jesus. He prayed first, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

To Stephen, **dying was only breathing out his soul into the hands of Jesus Christ! He knew it was not death--but life, that was before him.** His physical *body* was being mangled and broken--but his *spirit* could not be harmed. Beyond the strange mystery of death--Jesus waits to receive the departing spirit.

- **Death is only a gateway through which the soul passes, and then life and glory burst upon the vision of the emancipated spirit. The beautiful Scriptural designation of death tells us of life beyond, of resurrection, of immortality. We shall awake from this sleep of death--and our life shall go on again.**

We shall awake refreshed, lying down weary--and rising strong; lying down sick, or old, or deformed, or worn-out--and rising well, young and radiant in heavenly beauty!

- Through Stephen's example, we can learn to speak boldly for our faith, and know that our lives here on earth cannot compare with the joys we'll experience in heaven.

**Man can only kill the body, but they cannot kill the soul.**

VIII. Stephen's other prayer was also like his Master's. Jesus prayed for His murderers, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Acts 7:60). Stephen, with the same spirit of forgiveness, pleaded for his murderers, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

It is **the old lesson of love for enemies taught over again.**

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

## THE EFFECTS OF STEPHEN'S DEATH

Stephen's death was not in vain. Following are some of the events that were by-products (either directly or indirectly) of the persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom.

1. Philip's evangelistic tour (Acts 8:4-40)
2. Paul's (Saul's) conversion (Acts 9:1-30)
3. Peter's missionary tour (Acts 9:32 – 11:18)
4. The Church in Antioch in Syria founded (Acts 11:19)

### STRENGTHS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- One of the seven leaders chosen to supervise food distribution to the needy in the early church.
- Known for his spiritual qualities of faith, wisdom, grace, and power, and for the spirit's presence in his life.
- Outstanding leader, teacher, and debater
- First to give his life for the gospel.

### LESSONS FROM HIS LIFE

- Striving for excellence in small assignments prepares one for greater responsibilities.
- Real understanding of God always leads to practical and compassionate actions toward people.

### VITAL STATISTICS

- Church responsibilities: Deacon – distributing food to the needy.
- Contemporaries: Paul, Caiaphas, Gamaliel, the apostles



Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all Christians. Because he was the first to die for the faith, his sacrifice raises questions: how many risks do we take in being Jesus' followers? Would we be willing to die for him? Are we really willing to live for him?