

# The Death of Stephen

ACTS 6-7

As the church in Jerusalem grew, more and more poor people, especially widows, needed help with food and the daily things of life. The apostles knew the Lord wanted them to spend their time praying and teaching God's Word, so they asked the church to choose seven men to take care of the widows and make sure everyone was treated fairly. "Choose men who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom," they said. One of the men chosen was Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

The Holy Spirit was also using Stephen to preach the gospel with great signs and wonders. More and more people were paying attention to what Stephen said and did. The Jewish religious leaders didn't like that. They asked him hard, tricky questions as he spoke in public, hoping to make him look foolish. But Stephen's wisdom was too great for them because the Holy Spirit was helping him.

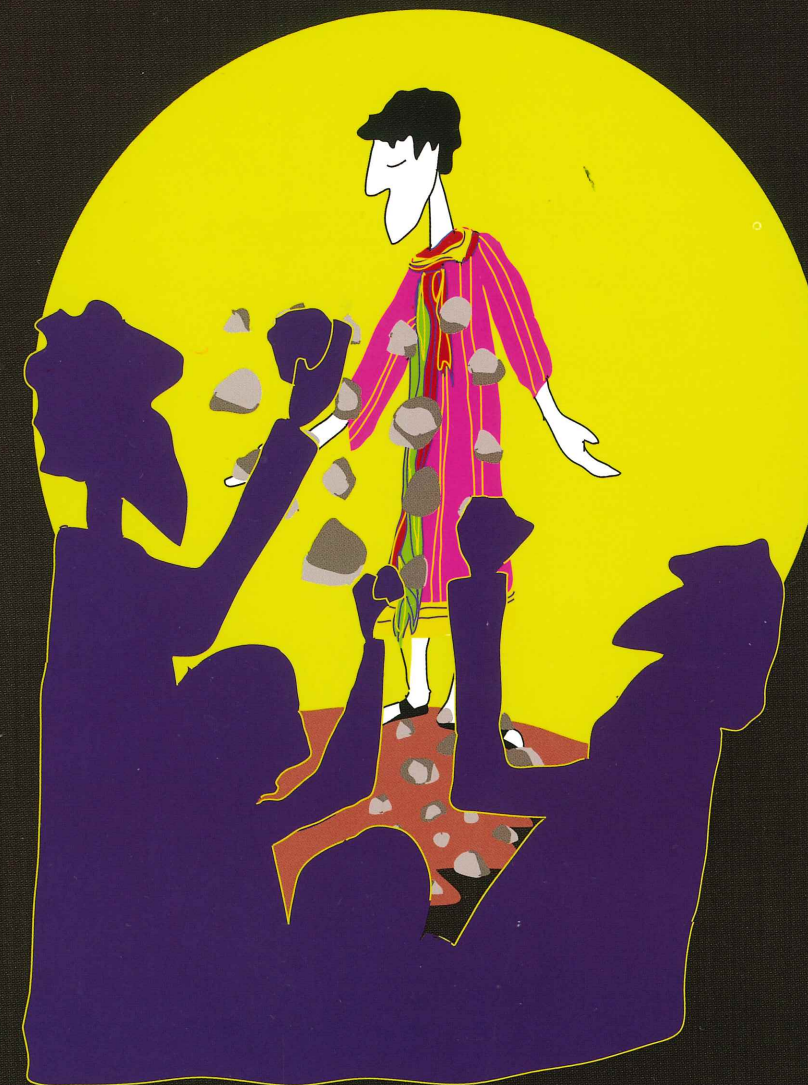
So this group tried another plan. They persuaded some men to say that Stephen was speaking against Moses and God. Though they knew this was a lie, they brought the story to the elders and scribes and stirred up the people against Stephen. Before long, Stephen was arrested and brought before the Jewish council. The false witnesses told their stories

and said that Stephen was preaching against the temple and trying to change the customs Moses had given them. Stephen knew he was only preaching the good news about Jesus. Despite all the things these men said, Stephen trusted the Lord. People watching him saw that his face looked like the face of an angel.

When it came time for Stephen to defend himself, he answered by preaching the gospel to everyone gathered there. He began with Abraham and went on to talk about Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon. Stephen reminded his listeners of God's promises, Israel's sin, and their slowness to believe and trust God. Finally Stephen said, "Just like your fathers before you, you are stubborn, stiff-necked people. You always resist the Holy Spirit. And you have betrayed and murdered Jesus, the Righteous One of God!"

The people were furious! But Stephen had even more to say as God gave him a vision. "I see the heavens opened and the glory of God. I see Jesus standing at God's right hand." With that, the people grabbed Stephen and dragged him out of the city. There they stoned him to death while a Pharisee named Saul stood by, pleased with what he saw. From that day on things were hard for the church in Jerusalem. Stephen's death marked the start of a great persecution, a time when Christians were mistreated, captured, and even killed by their enemies. Many Christians had to run away from Jerusalem. They were scattered throughout the countryside because it wasn't safe to stay together anymore.

When you first read about Stephen's death and the persecution of the church, it can seem like a total defeat. But God always works everything according to his master plan. The Christians who were scattered because of the persecution started preaching the gospel in the countryside. Because of that, many people outside Jerusalem heard the gospel and were saved. Luke reported, "The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). From that day until now, no one has ever been able to stop the advance of the gospel!



## Let's Talk About It!

What are the people doing and why?

What happened to the other Christians?

How does God use persecution to spread the good news about Jesus?