

## The Church's First-Century Martyr

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Freddy Fritz / General

Turning the World Upside Down / Martyr; Death; An Enemy; Satan; Glory; Jesus; Beauty / Acts 6:8-7:60

Acts 6:8-7:60 shows us three ways God makes death into the servant of his believers.

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## Introduction

After the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and Satan's counter-attack, the first-century church is ready to begin its worldwide mission of telling everyone about Jesus.

So far, the church has been composed only of Jews and restricted to Jerusalem.

However, the Holy Spirit is about to thrust his people out into the wider world, and the apostle Paul is to be God's chosen instrument to pioneer this development.

But before we get to that, Luke explains, in [Acts 6](#) through 12, how the foundations of the Gentile mission were laid by two remarkable men (Stephen the martyr and Philip the evangelist), followed by two remarkable conversions (Saul the Pharisee and Cornelius the centurion).

These four men, each in his way, together with Peter, through whose ministry Cornelius was converted, made an indispensable contribution to the global expansion of the church.

But first, the stoning of Stephen, the church's first-century martyr.

Today, I will not focus on the events leading up to Stephen's arrest or his speech to the Sanhedrin.

Instead, I want to focus on the death of Stephen, which is given to us in [Acts 7:54-60](#), and I especially want us to see how Christians die.

## Scripture

To see this in context, let's read [Acts 6:8-7:60](#):

**<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.**

**<sup>1</sup> And the high priest said, “Are these things so?” <sup>2</sup> And Stephen said:**

**“Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ <sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. <sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child. <sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ <sup>8</sup> And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.**

**<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him <sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. <sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers, <sup>16</sup> and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.**

**<sup>17</sup> “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. <sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God’s sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father’s house, <sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.**

**<sup>23</sup> “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’ <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ <sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.**

<sup>30</sup> “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

<sup>35</sup> “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. <sup>39</sup> Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ <sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

“ ‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,  
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

<sup>43</sup> You took up the tent of Moloch  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the images that you made to worship;  
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’

**<sup>44</sup> “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him. <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,**

**<sup>49</sup> “ ‘Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.**

**What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,  
or what is the place of my rest?**

**<sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?’**

**<sup>51</sup> “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”**

**<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.**

## Lesson

Let's be clear about a biblical truth: *Death is an enemy.*

It is not romantic, glamorous, or heroic.

Death is an enemy!

Paul says Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” ([1 Corinthians 15:25-26](#)).

God did not create us to die. Death is a curse and an enemy that came into the world through sin ([Romans 5:12](#)).

But while we are avoiding any simplistic, naive, and romantic images of death, let us firmly believe the great truth of our Christian faith: “‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Corinthians 15:54-57](#)).

And not only the victory but more than victory: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” ([Romans 8:35-39](#)).

We are more than conquerors over death through Christ.

God gives us the victory over death.

But more than victory.

Jesus defeats death.

Death is bound in the chains of resurrection power, so it cannot destroy us.

But more than that. More than that!

Death is handed over, bound and defeated, as a servant to the church.

We are more than conquerors because death is not just defeated and kept from destroying us; it is enslaved and made the servant of God's people.

This is the meaning of [1 Corinthians 3:21-23](#): "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

Death is yours in the way you are Christ's.

And you are Christ's to serve him and glorify him.

So death is your servant.

The enemy is defeated, bound, enslaved, and delivered into the service of the saints.

Today, I want us to see this and be encouraged by it in the case of Stephen's stoning.

Stephen died a horrible death by stoning.

But even here, death became Stephen's servant—in at least three ways.

Stephen had just preached a message to the Jewish leaders. His main point was that the essence of their religion was self-worship, not God-worship. They rejoiced in the work of their own hands, not in God ([Acts 7:41, 48](#)).

When Stephen reached the end of his message, the Sanhedrin were enraged and ground their teeth at him ([Acts 7:54](#)).

God's response to Stephen at this moment was exactly the opposite. He filled Stephen with his Holy Spirit ([Acts 7:55](#)).

This is not exceptional.

If you walk with God, you can expect him to do this for you, as David said in [Psalm 23:4a](#): "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

God draws near to every dying saint.

[1 Peter 4:14](#) says that when you suffer with Christ, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

There is a unique, helping grace given to dying Christians.

You may wonder: “Could I endure suffering for Christ in the hour of persecution—or even in the hour of *ordinary* death?”

The answer is, “No, you cannot, not in yourself.”

But you will not be left to yourself.

There will be a unique, helping grace for you in the hour of death.

The Spirit of glory and of God will rest upon you.

And when God comes in the hour of our death, he makes the enemy, death, into the servant of his believers.

Let’s notice how it happened with Stephen.

## **I. Death Is a Window to See Jesus (7:55)**

First, death is a window to see Jesus.

As the enemy death draws near and opens its jaws to consume Stephen, the Holy Spirit in Stephen turns the jaws of death into a window to see Jesus in heaven.

Instead of seeing the pit of hell and the face of Satan, Stephen sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Verse 55 says of Stephen, “**But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.**”

Do you see how death is stripped of its power here and made the servant of Stephen?

It raises its ugly head and threatens to take away all of the pleasures and joys of life, but instead, it opens the window of heaven and reveals the glory of God.

It threatens to take away our most precious relationships, but instead, it shows Jesus standing to receive us.

I don’t mean to say that every believer will get the same vision of the glory and Jesus that Stephen saw.

But I do mean to say that this is how the Holy Spirit comforts us when we are dying and robs death of its power.

One way or another, he makes death a window to the glory of God and Jesus.

And for those who love Jesus more than anyone else and long for the glory of God more than anything else, the sting of death is gone, and the power of death is broken.

That's the first way the Holy Spirit makes death serve the saint: he makes death a window onto God's glory and Jesus' person.

## **II. Death Is a Doorway to Be with Jesus (7:59)**

Second, death is a doorway to be with Jesus.

The Spirit enables Stephen to see through death a place of fellowship in the presence of Jesus.

Verse 59 says, **“And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ ”**

In other words, not only did the Holy Spirit turn the hour of death into a revelation of the glory of God and of Jesus, but he also showed Stephen that the reason Jesus was standing and not sitting (as it says in verse 55) *was to welcome his servant home.*

So death serves the dying saint not only as a window to see glory but also as a doorway to enter glory—not only a window to see Jesus but also a doorway to join him in eternal fellowship.

The believer's triumph over death is the calm and confident prayer, **“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”**

It is like you are dying in a small cabin in the woods.

The door is death, and you move toward it inch by inch.

As it opens, there is a large, roaring lion with bared fangs and furious eyes (cf. [1 Peter 5:8](#)).

Initially, you are terrified.

But then the Holy Spirit opens your eyes, and you see Jesus shining like the sun behind the lion.

He is standing with his arm extended to you and his face smiling.

Hanging tight in his other hand is a brass chain leading to an iron collar on the lion's neck.

You hesitate for a moment.

But then the Spirit gives you strength, and as you put your foot in the threshold and the mouth of the lion opens, Jesus flings him with a mighty jerk clear out of sight, and you enter into the presence of the Lord of glory.

That's the second way the Spirit makes death serve the saint.

It's not only a window to see Jesus; it's a doorway to be with him forever.

### **III. Death Draws Out the Beauty of Christlikeness (7:60)**

Finally, death draws out the beauty of Christlikeness.

The Spirit makes death serve Stephen by drawing out of him the beauty of Christlikeness in the hour of trial.

Verse 60a says of Stephen, **“And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ ”**

When Jesus was dying, he said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” ([Luke 23:34](#)).

Death had failed utterly as a curse to destroy Jesus's love and holiness.

And now, because Stephen was filled with the Spirit of Jesus, death fails again.

The devil designs for your death to produce despair and hopelessness and self-pity and resentment and bitterness.

But the design of the Holy Spirit is very, very different.

He destroys the power of death and makes death an occasion to show the beauty of Christ.

**“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”**

That is a great triumph of Christ-like mercy!

## Conclusion

Let me close by pointing out that there is a connection between these three ways that the Holy Spirit transforms death from an adversary into a servant.

This connection shows that the way to *die* in the power of the Holy Spirit is also the way to *live* in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to behold and to love the glory of God, and you see and know that Jesus is alive and triumphant at God's right hand, and when the Spirit gives you the will to say, "Jesus, there is no place I would rather be than with you, receive me," then, the beauty and power of Jesus will enter your life, and hopelessness, self-pity, resentment, and bitterness will be consumed by the presence of Christ and the hope of glory.

This is how we die by the power of the Spirit.

This is how we live by the Spirit: we love the revelation of God's glory, know Jesus' triumph over all our enemies, trust ourselves into his welcoming fellowship, and overflow with his grace to enemies.

This is why we seek the fullness of God's Spirit.

This is why we cry, "Lord, show us your glory."

May God help us to say with Paul, " 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" ([1 Corinthians 15:55-57](#)). Amen.