

Beyond The
Red Door



Who was St. Stephen?

By E. Ray Walker

For more than 200 years, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church has been a landmark in idyllic Culpeper, Va. For a little perspective, when St. Stephen's was built in 1821, Thomas Jefferson was living the high life on his mountaintop spread near Charlottesville. And, four years earlier, James and Dolly Madison had retired to their little farm not far from Culpeper.

So, one might ask, who was this St. Stephen?

Stephen is considered the first Christian martyr, meaning he was killed for his faith in Christ. He is a model of faith and forgiveness, and his final moments serve as a reminder to imitate Christ, especially when treated unjustly.

In Acts of the Apostles, he is called "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" and with the "face of an angel."

A brief Wikipedia bio of Stephen hits all the significant highlights:

Stephen (circa A.D. 5 — circa A.D. 34) is traditionally venerated as protomartyr, or first martyr of Christianity. According to the Acts of the Apostles, he was a deacon in the early church in Jerusalem who angered members of various synagogues by his teachings. Accused of blasphemy at his trial, he made a speech denouncing the Jewish authorities who were sitting in judgment on him and was then stoned to death. Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul the Apostle, participated in Stephen's execution.

The only source for information about Stephen is the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles. Stephen is mentioned in Acts 6 as one of the Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jews selected to administer the daily charitable distribution of food to the Greek-speaking elderly women, widows and orphans. (This task later was a source of accusations against Stephen.)

Useful information, certainly, but far from the full story.

Stephen and Jesus were contemporaries, living roughly the same time. Stephen was five years younger. Jesus was crucified A.D. 33; Stephen was stoned in A.D. 34. There are other parallels between the life of Stephen and the life of Jesus, including:

Sanhedrin trial: Jesus and Stephen were tried by the Sanhedrin, a Jewish judicial and administrative body that existed in ancient Israel.

Miracles: Jesus and Stephen performed miracles.

Forgiveness: Jesus and Stephen prayed for forgiveness for their executioners.

Death: The death of Stephen seems to recapitulate the death of Christ. For example, as Stephen is about to die, he says, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), similar to Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Crowd reaction: The crowds reacted violently to Jesus and Stephen.

Vision: Stephen saw a vision of the Son of Man (Acts 7:56).

Stephen is first mentioned in Acts 6 as one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles to distribute food and charitable aid to poorer members of the community. According to Orthodox belief, he was the eldest and was called "archdeacon."

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, born and reared outside Palestine. His name is Greek, meaning "crown." Nothing more is known about his early life.

According to Wikipedia, it is thought the appointment of the seven deacons was prompted by dissatisfaction among Hellenistic (Greek influenced but not born in Greece) Jews that their widows were being slighted in preference to Hebrew ones in the daily distribution of food.

Historians say it seems to have been among the synagogues of Hellenistic Jews that Stephen performed his teachings and "signs and wonders," since it is said that he aroused opposition there. Members of these synagogues challenged Stephen's teachings, but Stephen had bested them in debate. Furious at this humiliation, they suborned false testimony that Stephen had preached blasphemy against Moses and God. They dragged him before the Sanhedrin, accusing him of preaching against the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the Torah. Stephen is said to have been unperturbed, his face looking like "that of an angel."

Speech to Sanhedrin

In a long speech to the Sanhedrin comprising almost the whole of Acts 7, Stephen presents his view of the history of the Israelites. The God of glory, he says, appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, establishing at the beginning of the speech one of its major themes, that God does not dwell only in one particular building (meaning the Temple). Stephen goes into even more detail in the case of Moses.

Nevertheless, the Israelites turned to other gods. This establishes the second main theme of Stephen's speech, Israel's disobedience to God. Stephen faced two accusations: that he had declared that Jesus would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and that he had changed the customs of Moses.

Stephen denounces his listeners as "stiff-necked" people who, just as their ancestors had done, resist the Holy Spirit.

"Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of the angels, and have not kept it."

The account is that the castigated crowd could contain their anger no longer.

However, Stephen looked up and cried, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." He said that the recently resurrected Jesus was standing by the side of God.

The people from the crowd, who threw the first stones, laid their coats down so as to be able to do this, at the feet of a young man named Saul (later identified as Paul the Apostle). Stephen prayed that the Lord would receive his spirit and his killers be forgiven, sank to his knees, and "fell asleep." Saul "was consenting unto his death."

The site of Stephen's stoning is not mentioned in Acts. It is traditionally believed to have taken place near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem. His burial site is not specified.

ST. STEPHEN'S MIRACLES

Saint Augustine relates that the Blessed Stephen was glorified by numberless miracles. Seven times he brought back the dead to life, and cured multitude of the sick. Augustine says that the question arose of laying flowers on the altar of Saint Stephen, which flowers healed the sick upon whom they were afterward placed.

Linens, likewise, laid on the altar and later applied to the sick, healed particularly the maladies of the bones. In the 22nd book of the "City of God," Augustine reports the miracle of a blind woman who recovered her sight at the touch of a flower taken from Stephen's altar.

He also tells the story of one of the leading men of the city of Hippo, who was called Martial. He was an infidel and refused to be converted. This man fell sick, and his son-in-law, who was a Christian, went to the church of Saint Stephen, took some flowers from the altar, and secretly put them under his father-in-law's pillow. When the latter awoke at the break of dawn, he sent for the bishop. The bishop being absent, a priest came to Martial's home, and Martial asked to be baptized. And as long as he lived, he repeated these words: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" without being aware that they were the last words of the Blessed Stephen

What does Stephen's life and death mean for Christians today?

It may seem odd that a man who receives mention and dies within two chapters of the Bible has a great influence on believers today, but Christians can glean a lot of information from this saint.

First, Stephen shows believers they can have a powerful effect for the kingdom, if even for a short period of time. Although Scripture doesn't specify how long Stephen's ministry lasted, it appears he receives opposition very soon into the journey.

Second, no matter where we come from, God can use our past to shape our testimony and witness.

ST. STEPHEN FACTOIDS

Given his role as one of the first deacons of the Christian church, Stephen is considered the patron saint of deacons. Stephen is also the patron saint of stonemasons, bricklayers, altar servers, headaches (because he was stoned to death by a mob that targeted his head), horses and riders (in Vienna, Austria), and coffin makers (a nod the Stephen being the first martyr).

Around the world ...

In the United Kingdom and some Commonwealth countries, the December 26 holiday is commonly known as [Boxing Day](#), which takes its name from the practice of giving small gifts to household servants on that day for their work throughout the year.

In Ireland, the holiday is sometimes called Wren Day, because in the past a wren, a tiny bird, would be killed and taken door-to-door by children asking for money in exchange for a wren's feather, which people believed brought good luck. Some interpret this as a tip of the fedora to Stephen's delivering food to the poor. The tradition of going house-to-house on St. Stephen's Day survives in many countries, especially in Scandinavia, where the day is observed by visiting friends and going to parties.

In Western Christianity, St. Stephen's Day is a public holiday in many nations that are of historic Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran traditions, including Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Poland, Italy, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Catalonia and the Balearic Isles.

In Italy, St. Stephen's Day is known as "the day of the leftovers" because of the custom of reusing food scraps.

FEAST OF SAINT STEPHEN

Not a surprise, but the traditional dish served on the Feast of Saint Stephen (St. Stephen's Day, December 26) is a hearty stew made with Christmas leftovers — turkey, ham, bacon, vegetables and other ingredients.



“Saint Stephen the Martyr” by Carlo Crivedlli

Artistic representations often show Stephen with a crown symbolizing martyrdom, three stones, martyr's palm frond, censer and often holding a miniature church building. Stephen is shown as a young, beardless man with a tonsure (bald spot on top of the head), and wearing a deacon's vestments.