

## Stephen

My name is Stephen. I was a Deacon, one of seven selected to oversee the distribution of food to the widows of Greek Jews. You might not think of that as a front-line job in launching the church, but I was glad to do what I could, especially because this took pressure off the apostles. They needed to devote their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

In addition to our administrative duties, the Lord amazingly gave us power to perform miracles, which gathered a lot of attention. But I also got to preach. We all had been teaching new believers and discussing the gospel with the inquiring crowds. It was one of the qualifications for Deacon. But I also had the opportunity to preach a sermon, you have to call it "the sermon of my life." It was spoken only once. The impact was dramatic!

It happened as I was being tried before the Sanhedrin on the false charge of blasphemy. What an opportunity! These illustrious leaders were forced to listen to every word because it was a criminal trial! I reviewed the entire history of our people from Abraham to the present. The hearers could not doubt that I knew my subject. And they agreed with almost everything, at least up until the final point.

I spent a lot of time on Moses, since he was their focus, including Moses' messianic prophecy. "God will send you a prophet like me from your own people." I also pointed out the fact that the people also rejected Moses, more than once! I reviewed the shameful history of the whole nation's recurrent idolatry. This inserted a bit of reality to counteract the illusion of "the good old days." And to put the Temple in perspective, I quoted the words of Solomon, "The Most High does not live in houses made by men."

I think I had them in the palm of my hand up to that moment. Then the Holy Spirit gave me the conclusion. "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him."

That got a reaction! "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth." Instead of repenting, as the crowd did for Peter on Pentecost, they shouted for my death. Don't wish to be a preacher unless the Lord calls you!

It was clearly words given me by the Lord because I would never have dared to utter them. And if they had been subject to approval by a committee, they would have never been permitted. But I said them, and I was stoned. And that was exactly Jesus' plan! As I was dying, I saw the Lord standing at the right hand of the Father. I described it to my executioners and was able to say, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The Lord called my attention to a young Pharisee who did not throw any stones but closely watched everything I said and did.

The Lord revealed to me that the sermon was for him, Saul, the persecutor of The Way, soon to become Paul, the missionary. He remembered the whole message and repeated it to a man named Luke who recorded it in his history. So, my earthly ministry was short, but the sermon and its effect lives on. The majority of the hearers rejected the message. Saul was converted later and only by a unique series of miracles. And through that man, totally dedicated to the Lord, the church grew explosively.