

**Lesson 74**

**TEXT** Acts 6:1-15; 7:54-60

**OBJECTIVE** The students will be able to tell how Stephen is an example of withstanding persecution. They will further be able to explain how the Lord will be with and reward those who withstand persecution in our day.

**KEY VERSE FOR ANSWER** He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. — Matthew 10:39

**KEY VERSE FOR SEARCH** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. — Matthew 5:11

**ANSWER  
TITLE:** **A False Accusation**  
**SEARCH  
TITLE:** **Stephen**

**Reference Information**

The Libertines were Jews who had been captives at Rome, but being freed, had returned to Jerusalem where they had a synagogue.

The Cyrenians were people who lived in a city along the northern coast of Africa and gave their name to one of the synagogues in Jerusalem.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. The speech and death of Stephen mark the transition of Christianity from its earliest Jewish form to its extension among the Gentiles.

Stephen's ministry was not limited to providing for the

poor of the Early Church. Another aspect of his ministry engaged him in bitterest conflict with the adherents of Judaism. He taught in the synagogue of the Libertines (i.e., freedmen) and there debated with Diaspora Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. When it was evident that they could not refute Stephen's arguments in open debate, these Jews hired informers to misrepresent his arguments. These accusations were such that the council could be assured of the support of the people of Jerusalem. Since they were largely dependent upon the Temple for their livelihood, any threat to it constituted a threat to them.

**YOUR OPENER**

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# Stephen

**TEXT:** Acts 6:1-15; 7:54-60

**KEY VERSE:** Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. — Matthew 5:11

## RESPONSES

1. Our text shows that Stephen loved the Lord, was not afraid to stand up for what he believed, had wisdom, was full of the Holy spirit, was a man of faith, etc.

2. In discussing this question, the students should see that these men had the choice of either accepting what Stephen said, or in some way negating his preaching. They chose to reject his words and accuse him of blasphemy. Discuss with your students how our teachings or testimonies must also call forth a reaction—either acceptance or rejection.

3. As your students discuss the characteristics brought out in the first question, they should conclude that the Christian attributes Stephen exhibited no doubt were the very qualities that helped him withstand the persecution which came to him. His faith in God (Acts 6:8) surely gave him the strength to know God would bring victory out of this trial. The fact that he was “full of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 6:5) gave him the power he needed. His wisdom (Acts 6:10) gave him the insight that God was with him. His forgiving spirit (Acts 7:60) helped him stay true to the very end of his life. Responses you receive should be summarized by pointing out that Stephen did not receive persecution because he was unjust or sinful—rather the opposite.

The outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit in Jerusalem had stirred the whole city and in just a few months the new church had grown to the point where the Jewish leaders remarked that these people had “filled Jerusalem with their doctrine.” When God works, Satan seeks to oppose! At issue was the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ: If Jesus had risen, then the Jewish rulers had crucified the Son of God, their Messiah. They—the religious leaders of their time—were not about to admit to having murdered the Son of God! Because of this conflict, the Apostles had been imprisoned and warned not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus. About this time, Stephen appears on the scene.

1. Give a short analysis of Stephen’s character.

2. Why did the Jews of the synagogue of the Libertines, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians charge Stephen with “blasphemous words” in Acts 6:11,13, and 14?

3. Look back at your characterization of Stephen in question 1, and at the Scriptures in our text which brought out his attributes. What part did these attributes play in Stephen’s ability to withstand persecution? Could he have withstood without them? Explain your answer.

## ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION NOTES

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4. Stephen's God-given wisdom did not keep him out of trouble in witnessing for Jesus. When we can foresee difficulties or persecution arising from our testimony, what should we do?

5. Why would some think Stephen did not use "wisdom" in his stinging condemnation of his listeners in chapter 7, verses 51-53? Is the course he took in this situation always appropriate? Why or why not?

6. Name several possible reactions to conviction for sin. In our text, how does this relate to persecution?

7. Paraphrase Matthew 10:39, placing yourself in the verse.

8. In Matthew 5:11, what are the three words which give us the clue to receiving the blessing of God with regard to persecution?

4. The main thought evolving from your discussion of this question should be that they should not hesitate to take their stand for fear of persecution. It might be interesting to divide your class into groups and have one side present a hypothetical situation, and the other a solution—then reverse. For example: What do you do when the boss asks you to lie for him? When he asks you to buy him a pack of cigarettes? What if you were a checker at a supermarket and had to sell liquor? What if you were asked to participate in a regular activity that would limit your availability in God's service? What if you were offered a promotion that would require working on Sundays?

5. Some of the people undoubtedly felt that Stephen should have been more moderate in speech and less aggressive in his denunciation. Discussion revolving around this question should be guided carefully so the students will see their manner of witnessing must always be guided by the Holy spirit. While Stephen's tactics may have been blunt and forceful, they were God-directed at this place and to these people. That does not mean this method would always be appropriate. Your students should see the necessity of looking to God for direction.

6. Answers you receive may include: rejection, acceptance, delay, disbelief, or ridicule. After accepting students' responses, help them to see the tie between conviction and persecution in our text: that Stephen's persecution was undoubtedly a result of the conviction his words brought to his hearers. Your class should recognize that often persecution may stem from conviction.

7. Ask for a volunteer to give his paraphrase, and tell what he thinks this verse means. Could it encompass things other than just physical death? Encourage your students to cite some examples of how they might find the blessing in this verse even if they are not called on specifically to give up their physical lives.

8. The words are, "for my sake." Using this verse, summarize the lesson by zeroing in on the objective, discussing what rewards they as Christians can expect if they withstand persecution.

## YOUR WRAP-UP

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## SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS

What does it mean to be persecuted?

When you are persecuted or made fun of because you believe in God, what do you do?

Why do you think the Lord would allow persecution to come to you? What does this teach you?

How should you feel toward those who persecute you?

What should you do for those who persecute you?

Why doesn't God judge the persecutors immediately with punishment?

Why does God allow persecution of believers, including martyrdom?

Explain the difference between keeping quiet in your own defense and being willing to speak out for Jesus.

If he had recanted or even agreed to keep quiet, how would Stephen have fit back into the community or congregation?

Discuss how you have faced a particular situation involving persecution and how you felt about it. Did the end result convict the persecutor?

## THINGS TO DO

Have the class go through the church hymnal and find songs pertaining to persecution and have them read a verse or two. How do they end?

What are some of the persecutions or trials young people of today might have? Have your students help you make a list of some of them. Then talk about the positive ways to react to them. What are some of the rewards of standing for Jesus?

Put a heavy object in a small paper sack. By shaking it until the sack tears, show how easily our bodies can be destroyed, but also show that we have a soul that cannot

be destroyed by man. If a person withstands persecution, after his body dies his soul will be in Heaven.

Stephen was not the only one who was persecuted because he believed in the Lord. Set up a contest to see who can name other disciples who withstood persecution.

Ask your students to pretend they have a chance to enter Heaven and interview Stephen. Help them compose a list of questions they would like to ask him. Then discuss what his probable reply would be to each question.

## Answers for ANSWER

### What Should I Do?

Here are three letters from some Christian friends who need advice on how to handle persecution. Using the Bible verses given, can you give them the advice from the Lord?

*Dear...*

*While I was at school the other day some kids called me names and made fun of me because I was reading my Bible. Do I still have to love them and include them in my prayers?*

*Tom*

Matthew 5:44

*Dear...*

*Last Saturday when I went shopping with my friends I found that they were taking some things without paying for them. I told them it was wrong, but they laughed at me and made fun of me. I feel just awful. Can you give me some encouragement?*

*Linda*

Matthew 5:12

*DEAR...*

*I AM SO AFRAID TO TELL MY FRIENDS ABOUT THE LORD ANYMORE AFTER WHAT HAPPENED. I TRIED TO TELL A GOOD FRIEND ABOUT JESUS AWHILE AGO NOW HE WON'T EVEN TALK TO ME. HE EVEN SAYS BAD THINGS ABOUT ME TO OTHER PEOPLE. I JUST CAN'T UNDERSTAND. PLEASE HELP!*

*MARK*

1 Peter 2:20