

The Minor Festivals of the Church Year

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr - December 26

On the day after Christmas stands a festival day that is often overlooked or overshadowed because of the great celebration of Jesus' birth. It is the *Minor Festival: St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr* on December 26th. It may seem like an odd time and placement for such a festival day, but the Christian Church placed this festival as such because of the similarities between Christ and one of his faithful servants.

We are not told when Stephen became a follower of Christ, some theologians think Stephen was part of the 72 disciples that Jesus sent out (*Luke 10*), others think Stephen was one of the 3,000 converts after Peter's Pentecost sermon (*Acts 2:41*). The first time we hear about Stephen and the type of man he was is recorded in Acts 6. As the early church was growing, one of the duties that was being overlooked was the daily distribution of food to the widows. So the disciples chose seven men, whom they appointed to this task. Among the seven, "*They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*" (*Acts 6:5*). Stephen was chosen to be a deacon, an elected servant in God's church. With Stephen in charge of the "church duties," the disciples were free to devote themselves to the full time preaching of the Gospel.

As Stephen served faithfully, the Lord bestowed upon Stephen a special blessing as he, "*did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people*" (*Acts 6:8*). Since Stephen was a Gentile by birth, this drew the anger of the Jews of the church for no Gentile should be better than a Jew, even if serving in the church. This begins the saga that would lead to his martyrdom, and in so doing would draw the comparison between Christ and one of his faithful servants. It began with the Jews falsely accusing Stephen (*Acts 6:13*), as Jesus was falsely accused before the Jewish high court (*Matthew 26:59,60*). They even accused Stephen of speaking blasphemy (*Acts 6:11*), the same charge they accused Jesus of (*Matthew 26:65*). The Jews rejected Stephen's confession that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament laws and sacrifices (*Acts 7:51,52*), just as the Jews rejected Jesus as the fulfillment (*Luke 4:14-30*). At their rejection the Jews formed a mob and stoned Stephen (*Acts 7:57*), as the Jews had formed a mob to crucify Jesus (*Matthew 27:22-26*). And in the final moments before his death, Stephen showed no hatred but prayed for his executioners (*Acts 7:60*), as Jesus prayed for his executioners (*Luke 23:34*).

As Stephen was being stoned and his life was being taken from him, he died holding onto his faith in Christ. Before Stephen died, the Lord gave Stephen a vision of the glory that awaited him in heaven. "'Look', he said 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (*Acts 7:56*). The life and martyrdom of Stephen is of great encouragement for Christians even today. In this world we will face many rejections, many persecutions, and much hatred from those who do not believe in Christ. But like Stephen, our faith is our most valued possession, and we will endure all things in the certainty of our salvation. One day, like Stephen, we too will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God as we come into our eternal dwelling and reign with Christ in heaven forevermore.

On December 26th, we thank the Lord for faithful Stephen. It is also a day we thank the Lord for his faithful pastors, teachers, church leaders, and people – who daily proclaim Christ amidst the unbelief of this world. May God's people continue to preach and live, modeling the life and love of our Savior for the salvation of all who come to believe.

Read **Acts Chapter 7**.... as today's Scripture Lesson.'

Blessings to you and your families,
Pastor Matthew Guse