

Lesson 159: The Church is Persecuted.
Scripture: Acts: 6-7.
Memory Verse: But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus. (Acts. 7:55)

Stephen was a disciple who was richly blessed by God. God gave him the power to do great miracles and signs among the people. But some Jews were against him. They came and argued with Stephen.

But the Spirit was helping him to speak with wisdom. His words were so strong that they could not argue with him. So they paid some men to say, "We heard him say things against Moses and against God!"

This upset the Jewish elders, and the teachers of the law. They came to Stephen, grabbed him and brought him to a meeting of the Jewish leaders. They brought in some men to tell lies about Stephen. They said, "This man is always saying things against this holy place and the law of Moses. We heard him say that Jesus from Nazareth will destroy this place. He also said that Jesus will change the things that Moses told us to do. All the people in the meeting were watching Stephen closely. His face looked like the face of an angel.

The high priest said to Stephen, "Are these things true?" Stephen answered by reminding them of the history of Israel, starting with Abraham.

"Brothers and fathers, listen to me. Our glorious God appeared to Abraham, our ancestor. God said to Abraham, 'Leave your country and your relatives. Go to the land I will show you.' Abraham believed and followed God from then on.

"Next was Isaac who became the father of Jacob. Jacob had sons who became the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, was hated by his jealous brothers. They sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But God was with him. Joseph had many troubles there. But was reunited to his family, and though **his brothers tried do evil to him, God turned it into good.**

"Then, the Israelites became slaves in Egypt, and God sent Moses to lead them to freedom. Even in that, the Israelites did not trust God because they didn't trust Moses, and rejected God"

Stephen continued speaking: "You stubborn Jewish leaders! You have not given your hearts to God! You won't listen to him! You are always against what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell you. Your ancestors were like this, and you are just like them! Your fathers tried to hurt every prophet who ever lived. Those prophets said long ago that the Righteous One would come. But your fathers killed them. And now you have turned against the Righteous One and killed him. You received the law of Moses, which God gave you through his angels. But you don't obey it!"

When the leaders heard Stephen saying all these things, they became very angry. They were so mad that they were grinding their teeth at Stephen. But Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. He saw Jesus standing at God's right side. He said, "Look! I see heaven open. And I see the Son of Man standing at God's right side!"

Then they all shouted loudly. They covered their ears with their hands and all ran at Stephen. They took him out of the city and threw stones at him until he was dead. The men who told lies against Stephen left their coats with a young man named Saul. While they were throwing stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" He fell on his knees and cried in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" After Stephen said this, he died.

On that day people began trying to hurt the church in Jerusalem and make it suffer. Saul was also trying to destroy the church. This persecution caused many of Jesus' followers to spread.

What the leaders did was horrible, just like earlier leaders treated Joseph, Moses and the prophets. But, what people meant for evil, God meant it for the good; of His growing Church would expand from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and beyond.