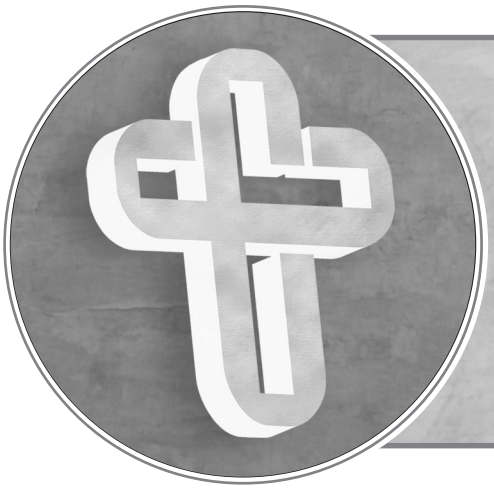


CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS
FEBRUARY 07 2026

the first Christian martyr

Scripture Story: Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:44-59.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 10, 11.
Key Text: Acts 6:8-10.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

By any measure, the martyrdom of Stephen is one of the most grizzly episodes in all of Scripture. An innocent man, he is brought to court on trumped-up charges, permitted a brief defense, and then summarily executed, by stoning no less.

The tale is made more disturbing when we consider that Stephen is described as a man "full of God's grace and power, [who] performed great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8, NIV). He was the kind of person who was a credit to society. But he had the misfortune—or fortune to some—of living during a time of great upheaval. The reverberations from the death of Jesus were just beginning to be felt. The Jews were determined to stamp out all members of the "sect" who believed in Christ. Stephen was a card-carrying member of this group, and he did not hide his allegiance. There's an important point for our youth to grasp.

Stephen's trial and death remind us that serving God often exacts a price. In a world in which prosperity preachers insulate their members from the reality that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12, NIV), Stephen's willing sacrifice reminds us of the life to which we have been called.

The preceding points should be noted as you teach this week. But special emphasis must be placed on the role that Jesus played in the final scenes of Stephen's life. God gave Stephen a view of Jesus standing on the right hand of the Father, very much alive and very much King. This vision comforts the humble servant of God in his hour of great distress. The Resurrection was no longer some abstract truth he had heard. For Stephen it was now a fact. Stephen transcended the most painful moment in his life, because he caught a glimpse of Jesus.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Know that obstacles and trials are part of the Christian's journey. *(Know)*
- Realize that through Jesus they can face any challenge in life. *(Feel)*
- Embrace the peace offered by God and share that peace with others. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Death and Resurrection, Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs, No. 26

The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed. Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people. When Christ, who is our life, appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and caught up to meet their Lord. The second resurrection, the resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later (Job 19:25-27; Ps. 146:3, 4; Eccl. 9:5, 6, 10; Dan. 12:2, 13; Isa. 25:8; John 5:28, 29; 11:11-14; Rom. 6:23; 16; 1 Cor. 15:51-54; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:13-17; 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 20:1-10).

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

This activity is designed to get the kids talking about some of the downsides of fame and success. Celebrities court the media and then complain when they are hounded, often for their negative behaviors.

Christians who seek to serve God faithfully can expect to attract attention. They will not have to worry about paparazzi photographers, but at some point they will have to stand up for what they believe, and do so against a tide of opposition. This is what Stephen faced. His faithfulness caught the attention of the adversary of our souls.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

"In the early 1600s Dorothy Traske conducted a private preparatory school in London. A lengthy waiting list testified to her popularity as a teacher.

"Mrs. Traske and her husband, John, were Puritans. Puritans believed that the Church of England needed to be purified and brought back to its New Testament roots. Seeking to order their lives after the clear principles of Scripture, the Traskes ran across the Bible commands regarding the seventh-day Sabbath.

"The Traskes determined to conform to this clear biblical command. Mrs. Traske closed her school on Saturday.

"When pupils' parents asked, why, Mrs Traske explained her convictions. Authorities investigated, and they threw her into London's Gatehouse prison. They considered her actions a defiance of the state.

"Mrs. Traske languished in prison for some 15 years. Not wanting to burden those on the outside with her needs, she subsisted for the most part on bread, water, roots, and herbs. Finally, shut away inside gray walls, she sickened and died. She was carried out of Gatehouse prison and buried in a field.

"For Dorothy Traske the Sabbath was a sign of loyalty. More than just another day, it was a command from God. To reject the Sabbath was to reject the Lord of the Sabbath and the Creator who so designated it. She faced imprisonment and death, not out of loyalty to just a day, but out of her faithfulness to God's command. In theory one 24-hour period is the same as any other. But according to God's Word, the Sabbath is decidedly different.

"God's command says, 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy' (Exodus 20:8, NKJV).

"The Genesis account records: 'God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made' (Genesis 2:3, NKJV).

"The seventh-day Sabbath is God's blessed and sanctified symbol of loyalty. Fly His flag. Worship His name this very Sabbath. If Dorothy Traske was willing to die rather than compromise her Sabbath allegiance, should we not be willing to worship Him each Sabbath rather than compromise ours?" (Mark Finley, *Solid Ground,* pp. 102, 103).

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

Religious persecution is a fact of life in many parts of the world. Yet, as Christians, we are called by God to deliver His message to a world desperately in need of the truth. The motivation to carry God's truth is the same as it was when Stephen gave his life for it. One who has been freed from the power of sin through Jesus' sinless life, death on the cross, and resurrection are enjoined to share that good news with others. Doing so will inevitably catapult one into direct confrontations with the devil and his agents in human form. But we must not be dissuaded. We must be ready to give our all for a God who gave us all.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.*

- The story of Stephen's martyrdom may be new to many of your students. As you read the story with them, ask them to give you a one-word description of the emotion that this story evokes in them. Death is never pretty, but a death by stoning was, and is, extremely gruesome. This practice continues today in some countries.
- The tension in the narrative is palpable. The leaders were determined to preserve the Jew-

ish faith and traditions at all cost. They were so blinded by this obsession that they could not see the Spirit of God radiating through the countenance of Stephen. Sometimes we, too, can become slaves to meaningless traditions when God offers us true meaning.

- Note that Jesus seems to enter the narrative at the very end, but this is not true. Stephen saw the vision of Jesus just before he was killed, but Christ was present with His servant in the person of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the entire Godhead paused its work to be with Stephen that day. Jesus stood by the Father, and the Spirit was in Stephen. God wants to be in our lives in the same way. This is one of the lessons that the students need to know.
- The students were asked to consider the similarities between the death of Jesus and the martyrdom of Stephen. Consider that both Jesus and Stephen were arrested on false charges. Both of them had sham trials. Both asked God to forgive their oppressors before being killed. Both saw heavenly realities in their moment of distress. Stephen was a type of Christ.

Use the following as more teachable passages that relate to today's story: Deuteronomy 31:6; Daniel 6:10; John 19:10, 11; Psalm 118:6.

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

Keep It Real

For this lesson, consider doing an Internet search for stories of Christians who are standing up for their faith in the face of great persecution. If you have access to someone in your church who has experienced persecution for their faith, consider having them come to class to share a brief testimony with the class.

A great place to begin your online search is www.persecution.org. Share these stories with your teens as an alternative way of introducing the Stephen story, or use the stories to encourage your teens to keep standing up for Christ. Also check out www.parl.gc.adventist.org to find out what the Adventist Church is doing to fight religious persecution throughout the world.

1. Opening Skirmishes. The death of Stephen was but the opening skirmish in a long battle to destroy the church of Christ. Following Christ's death and resurrection, a small group of followers heeded the call of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. Powered by the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2), they started to talk about Jesus to fellow Jews. Jewish leaders took particular umbrage at this, so they tried to stamp out the sect at all cost.

From those early days until this very moment,

Teaching From the Lesson

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite students to share the Key Text *with the class if they have committed it to memory.*
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* The Acts of the Apostles. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that spoke most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quote in Further Insight *conveys the point of the story in this lesson.*

Satan has tried everything within his power to stop the followers of Jesus. He continues to try to kill them. He tries to seduce them with allurements. He tries to push them into fanaticism. He tries to make them apathetic. He introduces heresy into the mix to cause people to lose their way. Yet all his efforts have done nothing but build up God's church. Thank God for keeping His church strong.

2. Self-defense? It bears noting that Stephen's defense (Acts 7) of his new faith was rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ was the long-awaited Messiah written about by the prophets of old. He made the point that though Jewish leaders revered the law, the law was not able prevent God's people, Israel, from descending into rampant idolatry and apostasy (Acts 7:37-43).

Stephen also noted that God's true tabernacle was not the one made by hands. The Most High didn't dwell in physical temples erected by humans, Stephen added, for what temple could hold the one who made all things (Acts 7:48-50)? Stephen saved his sharpest rebukes for the end. He aimed all the power of his words at the leaders and declared: "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51, NIV).

For a man about to die, Stephen's defense was remarkably self-effacing. Stephen saw in this moment an opportunity to tell the truth and, hopefully, save some souls. Ellen White tells us in *The Acts of the Apostles* that one of the souls he helped save that day was a man named Saul.

3. Good Persecution. Is there such a thing? Consider this quote from the servant of the Lord: "The persecution that came upon the church in Jerusalem resulted in giving a great impetus to the work of the gospel. Success had attended the ministry of the word in that place, and there was danger that the disciples would linger there too long, unmindful of the Savior's commission to go to all the world" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 105).

III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

Give each student a pencil and a 3" x 5" card. Have someone read John 14:27 in the hearing of the class. Repeat it if necessary.

Ask the students to take one minute to jot down all the things stressing them out and complicating their lives. When the students are finished, collect the cards and pray for the students. Ask God to do something in the coming week to bring His peace into the life of each student. Pull out the cards next week and debrief with them how the week went.

Summary

Share the following thoughts in your own words:

The call to stand for Christ will come to every follower of Christ. What we do with our moment will define us and likely impact the faith of others whom we influence. Stephen offers us a clear example of how to live for God in times of severe crisis.

Stephen was prepared for his moment because he had a strong relationship with God that shone through his life. He knew the Word of God, as evidenced by his defense, and he was not afraid to speak truth to the powerful.

The Spirit of God rested on him and gave him strength to endure his hour of trial. Near the end of his life, he was ushered into the very throne room of heaven and permitted to see a sight viewed by few human beings.

We are modern-day Stephens, and this is our moment to shine for God. All will not be called to die physically, but some will. Let us be ready.



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages Series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 10, 11.

CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS
FEBRUARY 07 2026

STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:44-59.
Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles (or Unlikely Leaders), chapters 10, 11.

the first Christian martyr



Photo by Colleen Cahill

keytext

"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen . . . who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke."

(Acts 6:8-10, NIV)

flashlight

"As Stephen stood face to face with his judges to answer to the charge of blasphemy, a holy radiance shone upon his countenance, and 'all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.' Many who beheld this light trembled and veiled their faces, but the stubborn unbelief and prejudice of the rulers did not waver" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 99).

what do you think?

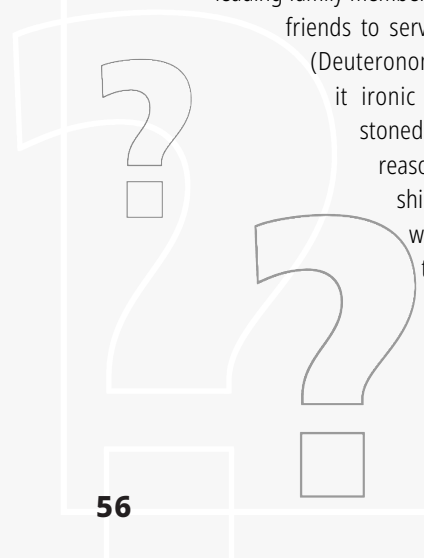
Big entertainment stars often complain about the nonstop attention that they receive.

If you were a public figure, which of the following would upset you most:

____ stalkers hanging around your property?
____ people rummaging through your trash?
____ photographers following you 24/7?
____ newspaper tabloids publishing lies about you?
____ fans constantly asking you for autographs?

did you know?

Stoning was a punishment given for various offenses in the ancient Jewish legal system. For instance, in the laws that God gave Moses for the Israelites, one of them stated that a person could be stoned for leading family members, relatives, or friends to serve foreign gods (Deuteronomy 13:6-8). Isn't it ironic that Stephen was stoned for just the opposite reason—rebuking false worship and declaring that Jesus was the Messiah and worthy of true worship?



INTO THE STORY

The Setup: "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

"Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'

"So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.'

"All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

Stephen's Defense: "'Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

"'However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?" says the Lord. "Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?"

"'You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.'"

The Stoning of Stephen: "When the members of the Sanhedrin

heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

"'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."
(Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:44-58, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

Had you ever read this story before? Describe some of the emotions you are feeling now, having read the story.

_____
_____

Go through this week's Scripture story and *put an X* by parts of the story in which you see tension.

Who are the main characters in this drama? Why are the Jewish leaders so upset with a man like Stephen who does wondrous miracles?

_____
_____

At what point does Jesus enter the story? What is the significance of that moment?

_____
_____

What two lessons do you take away from this biblical episode?

_____
_____

What similarities do you see between the stoning of Stephen and the crucifixion of Jesus?

_____
_____
_____
_____

punch lines

"Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them'" **(Revelation 14:13, NIV).**

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" **(Isaiah 53:5, NIV).**

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" **(2 Timothy 3:12, NIV).**

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die'" **(John 11:25, NIV).**

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" **(John 16:33, NIV).**

further insight

"The martyrdom of Stephen made a deep impression upon all who witnessed it. . . . His death was a sore trial to the church, but it resulted in the conviction of Saul, who could not efface from his memory the faith and constancy of the martyr, and the glory that had rested on his countenance."

—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 101

Sabbath

Read 2 Timothy 3:12.

Did you complete the *What Do You Think?* activity? If you were a celebrity, what behavior would anger you most? Well, thankfully, you probably don't have to worry about being stalked by some deranged person, or chasing snoops out of your trash can.

However, if you are a follower of Christ who faithfully lives out your calling, you will face opposition. Get your Bible and read John 15:18-27. In your own words, write two sentences explaining why the world will mistreat followers of Christ.

_____

Sunday

Read Isaiah 53:5.

After reading the *Into the Story* section, complete the *Out of the Story* questions. There's much more to Stephen's defense of his faith. Read Acts 7:1-53 to get the rest of the story. And if it's too much to read at one sitting, read some of it in the morning and then finish in the evening.

Stephen was ready to defend the faith that he had come to believe in. The Jewish leaders and their angry followers didn't go into a murderous rage until the end of Stephen's defense. What did Stephen say that set them off?

_____

Monday

Read Acts 6:8-10.

This Sabbath's *Key Text* focuses somewhat on the aura that surrounded Stephen. Let's see. He loved God, had a great reputation, was a persuasive speaker, and he worked miracles on the side. How do you think the Jewish opposition reacted to reports of Stephen's awesome ministry in Jerusalem?

_____

According to the *Key Text*, who was the source of Stephen's wisdom and power?

_____

Who or what is your source of wisdom? If you spend little time with God, can you really call Him your source of wisdom and power?

Tuesday

Read John 16:33.

Place yourself in the gallery described in this week's *Flashlight* quotation by Ellen G. White. All around you are spectators and agitators. Leaders mill about, whispering to each other and casting deadly glances at the calm man standing before them. Some cannot bear to look at him; others tap their feet nervously as he speaks.

Find a dictionary and look up the word "radiance." Write the definition here:

_____

If you were in the presence of someone who had that kind of luminescent light around them, would you want to harm them? Why did the Jewish leaders press on in their desire to kill Stephen? What drove them?

_____

Wednesday

Read this week's *Punch Lines*. Choose one or more to commit to memory today.

Read Acts 7:54-56. Whom did Stephen see as he looked up to heaven?

_____

Why do you think God allowed Stephen to see this scene before He died?

_____

Stephen had probably heard of Jesus' words found in the John 11:25 *Punch Line* from the disciples and/or other followers of Jesus. He believed in the resurrection of Jesus, but seeing Jesus standing to the right of God the Father sealed his faith. He knew that though he was about to die, he would one day rise again, as will all faithful followers of Christ.

Thursday

Read John 11:25.

The trial and murder of Stephen touched off a wave of persecution against the people of God. One of the chief architects of the persecution was a young man named Saul. Later after he converted to following Jesus and became known as Paul, he talked sorrowfully about how he had hurt followers of Jesus. Read what Paul said (Acts 26:9-11).

At the time, Saul believed that he was doing God's bidding by persecuting Christians. He was actually working against God. Are you on God's side? How can you tell? How did Stephen die in the hope of the resurrection? (See reading for today.) How was Stephen's death a seed that helped spread the gospel of Jesus?

Friday

Read Revelation 14:13.

Stephen did not die in vain. In fact, his life gave courage to persecuted believers during his time, and it still does today. The reading for today found in Revelation 14:13 reminds us that the righteous works of those who die in the Lord will continue to follow them.

Think about this question as you go about your day today. What will your legacy be? What will you be remembered for? Ask God to help you leave a mark on earth for His glory.

_____

_____

this week's reading*

The Acts of the Apostles (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 10, 11.

* Unlikely Leaders is a special adaptation of *The Acts of the Apostles* created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press. Get more information about it at http://www.cornerstoneconnections.net/article/191/about-us/conflict-of-the-ages-companion-books#.URlhF1rBO9s. By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.