

# + On the Shoulders of Giants +

Lessons in holiness from the pro's who have gone before us

**Name:** Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

**Lifetime:** He was a contemporary of the apostles

**Location:** Jerusalem

**bio:** Stephen is known as the “proto-martyr” (*protos* is a Greek word meaning *first*), because his is the first martyrdom recorded in the history of Christianity, after Christ’s own crucifixion. He was one of the first deacons, and worked alongside the apostles and early believers in Jerusalem, spreading the Gospel and building up the young Church there. He proclaimed the truth with boldness, calling the people to change their ways and to not follow their ancestors who persecuted the prophets and did not let the Holy Spirit move in their hearts. But because of the hardness of their hearts, they did not change their ways, and held tight to the possessions and ways of life that they were comfortable with. They did not want to hear the challenges he put before them. One day the crowd attacked Stephen while he was preaching, threw him out of the city, and stoned him to death. A wave of persecutions broke out in many cities after this event, but it only caused Christianity to grow even more, as more and more people stood up for the Truth and gave their lives for this cause.



**St. Stephen**  
First Martyr

**Read on! :** Acts 6, 7, 8:1-3

**Feast Day:** December 26th

## Why is this feast right after Christmas?

Jesus is the reason for the Christmas season; that cannot be denied. But what is the reason for Jesus’ coming in the first place? As we celebrate the baby Jesus’ arrival in Bethlehem, we can so easily forget that this baby came with a mission: He was, essentially, born to *die*. God sent his only Son into the world for the specific purpose of dying for us, as an expression of his love for us, and as a means of achieving salvation for all. The Church celebrates St. Stephen’s martyrdom during the Christmas season as a reminder that the crib is just a prelude to the cross, and that those who call themselves true disciples will continue to come and adore him through their lives, through the good times *and* the bad. Why are we be surprised then, in living the Christian life, when hardships come our way, or when the Gospel message challenges us to change? St. Stephen was ready to die for his beliefs because Jesus was not the king of his heart only certain seasons of the year. He kept the truth of Christmas alive in his heart 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, 365 days of the year...

Stephen was able to stay true to his word and be a faithful witness to Jesus because he remembered the Lord's promises of peace, an end to his suffering, and a place in his Kingdom. Stephen was able to fight the good fight until the bitter end, keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus. When life gets rough for you, where do you find your hope and peace? If it's not in Jesus, then where do you turn?

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We read in Acts 7:54-60 and Acts 8:1-3 that Saul - later known as *Paul* - was a witness to Stephen's martyrdom. You can bet that Paul remembered Stephen's courage and faithfulness to the Gospel later, when Paul was going through his own conversion and undergoing persecution for the same cause! Stephen's hope in the Lord became Paul's same hope when he faced his own death later. Is there someone you have known who has suffered greatly in their life, whether physically or any other way, who inspire you with their trust in God's promises and their hope in the glory of life to come?

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"Wait for the Lord, take courage; be stouthearted, wait for the Lord!" (Ps. 27:14). Sometimes the toughest part about holding on to our hope is that we need to wait on God's timing. Take a moment to think about your daily life and the culture that we live in. Our heads are spinning with places to go and things to get done! What about the culture we live in, makes it difficult to pursue the virtues of patience and perseverance that are essential to **hope**?

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