



# IN THE WORD



Photo: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/Erik M. Lunsford

## Faith of the **Martyrs**

**William S. C. Johnson**

On July 1, 1523, two young Augustinian monks, Hendrik Voes and Jan van Essen, were led into the marketplace in Brussels and burned at the stake for the crime of believing in Lutheran doctrine. While they became the first martyrs of the Lutheran Reformation, they stand in a long line of brothers and sisters who have suffered and died for their Christian faith, a line that continues even today.

While we often think of martyrs as people who have died for the Christian faith, the original Greek word, μαρτυρέω, means “To bear witness.” In the early Church, the association of martyrdom with witnessing is directly assumed. Tertullian wrote in the second century, “The blood of the witness (martyrs) is the seed of the Church.” From early on, the Church has known martyrdom is often a part of bearing witness to our faith.

### **I. Being a Christian has a cost**

God’s grace and mercy are gifts, freely given to us on account of Christ’s sacrifice for us. We are saved by grace and never by works. Sometimes, though, holding to that faith can cost us socially, economically, or even physically. What are some ways that your faith has cost you? Have you lost relationships and opportunities or even suffered physical loss as a result of faith in Christ?

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**Read Matthew 5:2–12.** How were the prophets treated in their day? How is that “blessed”?

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How does Jesus command that we react when we are persecuted?

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**Read John 15:18–27.** Notice that Jesus doesn’t describe persecution as a possibility for the Church, but a certainty. How does this change how you might react to persecution when it does happen?

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What are some ways that you perceive persecution happening in the world around you today?

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### **II. This is nothing new: The story of Stephen**

**Read Acts 6:8—7:60.** Stephen is regarded as the first recorded martyr of the Christian faith. In this text, he has been brought to stand before the Sanhedrin, false witnesses were brought against him, and the council demanded that he answer the charges against him.

How do you think Stephen felt at that moment?

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Stephen’s answer in chapter 7 traces an important thread through the history of God’s people. The promise given to Abraham is the same promise fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ. What other historical events does Stephen connect with the coming of Christ?

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Notice in verses 51–53 that Stephen sees his testimony as connected to the mistreatment of the prophets in the Old Testament. What are some ways the Church has suffered since the time of the Apostles?

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Consider some of the stories of martyrs available in the Christian Cyclopedia online (scan code). Some things don’t change, and the persecution of God’s people for speaking His Word is a constant throughout history. Which of these histories do you find particularly compelling?



What can the Church today learn from their example?

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**Read Acts 8:1–4.** Saul stood and gave approval to the cold-blooded murder of the first recorded Christian martyr. Two chapters later in Acts, Saul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and went on to become one of the pivotal leaders, witnesses, and authors of the New Testament era. How do you think Stephen’s testimony and martyrdom affected Saul?

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How does this perspective change the ways we react to the people who persecute us today?

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### III. The end of the story

**Read Matthew 24:3–14.** Again, persecution is not optional for the people of God. In fact, Christ promises us here that, before

His return in glory, the persecution of God’s faithful people will increase, and “many will fall away.” While it can be hard to say what we might do in those circumstances ourselves, what are some helpful things we can do now to prepare ourselves to give an answer, much like Stephen did?

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**Read Revelation 6:9–11.** This section of Revelation describes circumstances like war, violence, injustice, death, and persecution that have existed for generations. The central message of Revelation is not that these things will happen eventually or even that they’re happening now. We all know that. The message of hope is that there will come a day when these things *stop happening*. How does it change your perspective on martyrdom when you know that the long line of those who have suffered for their faith will eventually come to its end?

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How does it change things to know there will come a time when the last drop of blood is spilled?

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**Read Revelation 21:1–4.** At the end of all things, when this creation is unmade, and a new heaven and earth are made whole, the persecution of the Church will, at last, be at its end.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, You have always provided Your people with faithful witnesses willing to live, suffer, and die for the sake of Your Word. We thank You for the example of those martyrs who have gone before us in the faith. We pray that You will be with those around the world who continue to suffer for the faith. Strengthen them to be faithful in whatever trials they face, that they might endure to the end and receive the crown of life appointed for all who believe in Your Son. Grant that we too may be able to stand in our day of trial, that we might join their ranks as faithful witnesses to Your Son. 🙏

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