

'Blessed are those who continually allow themselves to be persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

Matthew 5:10 (Greek tense)

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he called His new disciples with these words, **'Follow me'**. After his resurrection from the dead and just before His return to heaven, He commissioned His disciples with these words: **'You will be my witnesses...'**. The Greek word for witness is **martus**. After Jesus left the earth, His disciples took on the role of being witness to what they had seen and heard. They soon began to face opposition and even death threats from those threatened by their message. The first disciple to die for his faith in Jesus was Stephen. He was a witness and a martyr and those two words have been synonymous for many Christians who have faced persecution in the last 2000 years. The word **martus/witness** is used in these scriptures. - Acts 1:8, 22:20; Revelation 2:13. It is unnatural to love one's enemies and not to react in hate and violence. However, Christians who are in harmony with Jesus live that way, as Holy Spirit gives them supernatural power to rejoice in the privilege of suffering for Jesus and righteousness.

Persecution in the early church

Believers in Jesus got in trouble because they did not conform to their culture. They did not socialize freely as we can. because most events of that day were accompanied by offerings to idols. Because of their secret meetings and separatism, Christians were lied about, slandered and **labeled in different ways**.

- **'Atheists'** and **'Rebels'** - Because they did not pray to pagan gods or use idols, they were perceived as insulting the gods of Rome. To keep unity in the vast empire,, Rome required all citizens to burn incense once a year to Caesar and say "Caesar is lord". They would then receive a 'certificate' which proved that they were a good citizen in right standing with the empire. They could then worship any god they wanted. However, true Christians would not compromise and would only confess that 'Jesus is Lord'.
- **'Immoral'** and **'Cannibals'** - Because of their secret meetings with agape meals called 'love feasts, where they greeted one another with kisses, they were accused of orgies. They drank the blood and ate the body of Christ. Outsiders misunderstood the symbolism and thought they were into cannibalism

Nero (**Nero Caesar** in Hebrew = 666 and considered **the beast** in Revelation 13) covered Christians with pitch and set them on fire, which provided light for his garden parties. He sewed Christians in the skins of wild animals and sent his hunting dogs out to tear them to pieces. Hissing molten lead was poured on Christians and red-hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies. Eyes were torn out and body parts were ripped off and roasted before them. Many other gruesome scenes took place.

As mentioned, Stephen was the first Christian martyr, precipitated by his stance against religious hypocrites who always resisted the Holy Spirit. They stoned him and just before he died, 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'**. - Acts 7:55. Normally we think of Jesus seated at the throne of God, which symbolizes his kingly authority, but there Jesus stood up.

When believers in Jesus stand up for him on earth, He stands up for them in heaven!