

# St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

**“‘TIS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON”**

**Matthew 23:34-39**

**St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr**

**Analysis Steven E. Albertin**

Introduction:

It is important to note that St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr is the first of three commemorations (Dec. 27 St John, Apostle and Evangelist and Dec. 28 The Holy Innocents, Martyrs) that follow on the heels of Christmas in the liturgical calendar. If our secular society wonders why Christians drag their feet during the season of Advent and are unwilling to jump on the bandwagon and start “celebrating Christmas” the day after Thanksgiving, then these three days will absolutely convince it that Christians are nothing more than spoil-sports who want to ruin the festivities of the season of Christmas. These three days of commemoration are days “drenched in blood.” They are dark reminders of the kind of world into which Jesus was born and in which we live. They reveal the depth of human sin and depravity that so often erupts in violence. They show us why it was necessary for God to take such drastic action to save us: literally becoming human flesh, taking upon himself the sin of the world and suffering the consequences. These three days remind us that it is a mean and nasty world out there. It is a world that took the life of Stephen, sent St. John to exile on Patmos and slaughtered the innocent children of Bethlehem. These three days ultimately show us why the birth of Bethlehem could only reach its climax in the cross of Calvary. These three days explain why it was necessary for this Christ to eventually suffer and die. These three days show us The Reason for the

Season of Christmas. The first of these three days, St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr, begins the violence and the blood letting and reveals a world bent on exposing itself for what it really is.

---

## **Diagnosis: “Without Rhyme or Reason”**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *“Resisting the Reason”*

During Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem he plays hardball with the religious establishment harshly confronting them with their sin, hypocrisy and most of all with their failure to see the real reason behind his ministry: he is Messiah, the One in whom the Kingdom has come near. But the establishment (religious, political and social) cannot tolerate such truth telling. Just like the prophets who went before him—and Stephen who would come after him—Jesus’ prophetic truth telling only generates anger and hostility from those who must resist the truth and must perpetuate the lies. In the midst of the celebrations and parties that are still going on during these days after Christmas, we don’t really want to know the reason why God chose to be born in human flesh at all. Christmas is all about family, nostalgic longing for the simplicity of Christmases past, Santa, peace and good will and the birth of a cute baby. Now, what could be more sweet than that! Don’t confuse us with the facts! We will do anything we can to deny, avoid and resist acknowledging the reason for the season.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *“Killing the Reason”*

Jesus seems to be tempting fate as he reminds Jerusalem how in the past it killed the prophets and stoned those who tried to tell it the truth about its own sin and hypocrisy. Stephen did the same when he boldly reminded those who had crucified Jesus

that they had killed the One sent from God. But Jesus and Stephen didn't just want to "read Jerusalem the riot act." Their intent was not just to righteously criticize those who were failing to measure up. The ultimate reason for their hard language was love. What could be a more loving image than a hen gathering her brood under her wings? They ultimately wanted to win the hearts and minds of their critics, but such winning could not be done at the expense of the truth. Such tough love was risky. It could cost them their lives, if the ones whom they wanted to win had no interest or desire in being won. We may not be shedding anyone's blood or taking anyone's life in order to shut up the criticism. But we are pretty determined to get our way and get ahead. We don't want to be told to trust God or anyone else. We would rather be on our own, looking out for ourselves, and quite willing to ignore, if not thwart, anyone else who gets in the way of our righteous ambitions.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *"Killed by the Reason"***

When Jerusalem would finally reject Jesus and shed his blood on the cross, they were putting themselves in a long tradition of those who had violently rejected God and his messengers. Such shedding of blood did have its consequences. It would not go unpunished, just as the blood of Abel and Zechariah did not go unpunished. Jesus had come in the name of the Lord. To blow off the Lord is nothing trivial. If Jerusalem was not willing to accept Jesus and his offer of shelter under the wings of God, then neither would God be willing to look the other way. Such an ultimate rejection has ultimate consequences. "See, your house is left to you, desolate." So, in a sense the criticism raised by our secular critics is true. We Christians are the ultimate spoil-sports when it comes to Christmas. Failure to discern the real reason for the season finally means that you don't have a season to celebrate at all. It finally means that all of the

frenzied festivity of this season is the last desperate effort of a world that is in the last stages of denial before the roof falls in and “he comes again to judge the living and the dead.” Only this time he comes not as a loving mother hen but as a hungry predator poised to devour a prey that has been foolish enough to ignore all the warning signs. Such foolishness means that when the deadly consequences strike, the victims think it is without rhyme or reason. But, as Jesus reminds his critics, just look at history. Such a fate should not have been unexpected. “No one gets out alive!” (Jim Morrison)

## **Prognosis: “With Rhyme and Reason”**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *“The Reason for the Season”*

Jesus provokes Jerusalem to its eventual violent response of crucifixion not because of some suicidal death wish or because he wanted revenge for what Jerusalem had done to the prophets before him. No, crucifixion was the only way the ultimate will of his Father could be done: mercy. Despite repeated rejections, the mother hen was determined to gather her brood under her wings. The only way to persuade the brood to return would be to win their trust through the ultimate act of love. So, Jesus enters that long line of prophets rejected by Jerusalem and willingly suffers their fate. The mother hen is impaled on a cross. But unlike every other martyred prophet before him, Jesus is raised from the dead. Through his Son, the Father chooses to suffer the fate Jerusalem deserved so that judgment is ended and Jerusalem is forgiven and no longer left desolate and vulnerable to the attacks of predators. The threatened judgment that was very imminent (“all this will come upon this generation”) is transformed into the offer of mercy. This is indeed the reason for the season. Bethlehem points to Calvary. The wood of the manger will become the wood of the cross. The blood of the babe lying in the manger redeems the blood of St. Stephen. These days

after Christmas, “drenched in blood,” already point us ahead to Holy Week and Easter, the real reason for the season.

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *“Blessed Is the Season”*

The post-Easter Matthean community was able to hear these words not as an imminent threat or as a harsh prophetic word fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but as promise “already but not yet” fulfilled. The final judgment was pre-empted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, they can look forward with faith and hope to that day when he “comes again to judge the living and dead,” whether that day be at their last breath or at the Last Day. When that day comes, unlike all those who have failed to discern the reason for the season, they will not be cowering in fear but standing tall with hope rejoicing: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” So also for us. In a world riddled with violence and blood, where victims are piled high and killing fields litter the horizon, all without rhyme or reason, we can rejoice. We can look at the baby in the manger and not be deluded by fanciful dreams of nostalgia but see the real reason for the season. Unlike our secular counterparts who are still scratching their heads wondering what has gotten into our heads and hearts, who bemoan the fact that we are such spoil-sports in the midst of the eggnog and mistletoe, we can truly celebrate the true blessing of this season: the babe in the manger who will grow up to gather under the protection of his wings St. Stephen, St. John, The Holy Innocents and all the victims of this world.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *“Blessing the Season”*

Buoyed by such words of promise, the post-Easter Matthean community was not only able to hear these words differently, they were able to live their lives differently. Like the prophets, Jesus, and St. Stephen before them, they were able to

face their own persecutions with faith and hope. Such suffering and martyrdom was not a curse but a blessing. It was not something they “had to” do in order to prove their status. On the contrary, it was something they “got to” do because of the Jesus who went before them. As a result they did not have to foolishly cling to life or scramble to find some idolatry or perpetuate some lie that would save their skins. Freed from having to live for themselves, they were able to give their lives away in service to neighbor and in witness to the hope that was within them. Because we know the real reason for the season, we are free to let Christmas be Christmas. We are able to truly bless the season not by scrambling to find the elusive “Christmas spirit” in the world’s endless parade of Christmas traditions and empty Christmas wishes but by focusing on Christ and the new life he brings. That may make us look like spoilsports. But the season is not about us and what we can get out of it. On the contrary, blessing the season is blessing it as Jesus did: pouring out our lives in the service of others, “shedding our blood” even for the sake of our enemies, and choosing not a life of “getting back or getting even” but a life marked by the same words that Stephen prayed when faced with the sadistic hatred of his enemies: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” That is what it truly means to bless the season, not only the season of Christmas but every season of the year. That is the reason for the season.