

ACTS
Stephen, The Martyr
Acts 7:54-8:1

Have you ever given much thought to the fact that someday you might have to die as a martyr for your Christian beliefs? A martyr's death is somewhat remote for most of us because we live in the U.S.A. which has a constitution which guarantees separation of church and state and the right to worship God as one's conscience may dictate. Martyrdom is like a fairy tale to most American Christians, but Christians in various parts of this world are suffering persecution and dying for their Christian convictions at this very hour. Martyrdom has been a regular experience for many throughout the history of the church, and it may yet become our lot in America if separation of church and state is not honored by our government.

Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian church. He was a brilliant young man who was probably a businessman in Jerusalem and a deacon in the local church at Jerusalem. He was an outstanding teacher of the Word of God and some think if his life would not have been taken early, he would have been called "The Teacher" of the first century in the Christian church. Stephen was a progressive person who led the way in making a smooth transition from Old Covenant worship to New Covenant worship. He was a spiritual man, full of wisdom, full of power, full of grace, full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. It was a young man, full of zeal and the Holy Spirit, that God chose to be the first martyr for the Faith. Young men are idealists, loaded with zeal and bold as a lion. Stephen had all the qualifications to be a great man of God on earth but instead God made him a great saint in heaven.

Stephen preached his great sermon before the Sanhedrin whereby, through giving the history of Israel from Abraham to King Solomon, he defended the charges of the Sanhedrin that he was guilty of blasphemy against God and Moses because he spoke against the Temple and the Law of Moses. When he finished giving the history of Israel, he turned the tables - the prisoner became the prosecutor - and he accused the Sanhedrin of being guilty of constantly resisting the Holy Spirit of God because they were a stubborn, hard and stiffnecked people who would not take the yoke of Christ. "You men who are stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did" (Acts 7:51). Furthermore, Stephen accused them of murdering Messiah. "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become" (Acts 7:52). And lastly, he accused them of breaking the Mosaic Law which they claimed to keep. "You who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it" (Acts 7:53). This was the day when "the prisoner charged the judge and the jury with murder."

HATRED OF TRUTH Acts 7:54

"Now when they heard this they were cut to the quick, and began gnashing their teeth at him." -- Upon hearing Stephen's charges against the Sanhedrin and all Israel, the Sanhedrin became furious and enraged with anger against this young upstart Stephen. They were "cut to the heart" or literally "sawn asunder." The words of Stephen cut through these Jewish leaders like a buzz saw. They began gnashing their teeth; that is, they were clattering their teeth as a vicious animal about to tear his victim apart. They were so stirred by the truth that they could not stand it. Truth cuts and when it is presented one must either accept it or fight against it. The truth brought conviction to the Sanhedrin and when conviction of conscience and stubborn resistance are combined, there is hardness of heart, rage, fury and anger. Truth never leaves a person neutral; it will drive a person to yield or balk. Truth drives a person to a decision, just as the truth was driving the Sanhedrin to crown Christ or crucify Him again by putting Stephen to death.

Jesus told us that He came to divide people because He is the truth and preaches the truth.

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; and A MAN’S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD” (Matt. 10:34-36).

The natural, unsaved man hates the truth of Christ and refuses to bow to His lordship. If men resist, buck and even get angry when the truth is presented, we know that the Holy Spirit is bringing conviction and He is at work in that stubborn soul.

HEAVENLY VISION Acts 7:55,56

“But being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God.” -- Stephen, probably not aware that he would soon die, had a vision. Stephen, unaware of his persecutors and having a countenance upon his face like an angel, was looking up into heaven. Obviously, he was looking up towards heaven, seeking divine help. This, of course, should be the attitude of every Christian.

“If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1,2).

As Stephen was looking towards heaven, God gave him a vision. He saw the glory of God. Perhaps it was a brilliant light that he saw which was reflective of the sum total of all the attributes of God. Why did Stephen see the glory of God? Because he knew the God of glory.

Stephen, like many Christians since him, had some kind of a mental vision of God just before passing out of this world. It is though God is giving His people a glimpse of heaven before they actually get there. This vision to Stephen was a remarkable manifestation of Christ's love and presence with him and it must have been a great comfort. I personally believe that Jesus Christ reveals Himself in a very special way to every Christian who dies, so that at the moment of death a Christian knows that Christ goes through death with him.

“And Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God.’”

This vision is interesting because Stephen saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. We are told that after Christ's death and resurrection, He ascended into heaven, taking his seat at the right hand of God the Father. Christ sat down because as our Great High Priest, He had finished His work on the cross and everything necessary for salvation was completed. “When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3b). Christ sat down because His work of redemption was over. He did everything in His death, resurrection and ascension to gain the salvation of men. Christ has accomplished salvation. He sat down and it is done; it is finished. Now all a seeking sinner must do is say, “Thank You, Lord Jesus, for dying for me.” Church membership, baptism, the Lord's Table, good works cannot save us because Christ in His death alone can save. Absolutely nothing can save a man from sin but the finished work of Christ. The Bible says “Christ sat down on the right hand of the Father.” Yet, here we see Christ standing. Why? For some reason, Christ stood up momentarily. Why? Could it be that Christ stood up for the receiving of the first Christian martyr into heaven? What a way to enter into heaven! To have the living Christ stand up for a personal greeting. Perhaps Christ stands up to greet all Christian martyrs who give their lives for Christ. Who knows, maybe Christ stands up to greet all Christians who die and enter into heaven. We know for sure that He stood up for Stephen.

HORRIFYING DEATH Acts 7:57, 58a

“But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears.” -- These rebellious Jews, under conviction because of hearing the truth, undoubtedly sensed that Stephen was in some special communion with God and this made them more furious and angry. They covered their ears so they could not hear the truth and they

shouted in outbursts of passion so as to vent their angry feelings. It seems at this point that all pandemonium broke loose (lynch law was in force) but there was some legal basis for the stoning of Stephen.

“And they rushed upon him with one impulse. And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him.” -- The process of stoning has an Old Testament basis. “Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him” (Lev. 24:14). “The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 17:7). The stoning process in Jewish law was very interesting. The one to be stoned was taken to a cliff. The cliff had to be twice the height of the person being stoned. The crowd, led by the two witnesses, moved toward the one to be stoned. About fifteen feet away, they called upon the victim to confess. When they got about six feet away, they took off their outer garments so as to throw the stones more freely. Then the two witnesses rushed on the person and pushed him over the cliff. He fell to the ground below and two people turned the victim face up. If he was still living, the two witnesses picked up huge stones to stone the victim. Then the crowd would begin to throw stones until the victim was a mass of broken bones and a bloody mess. Stoning was an unpleasant and hideous death and the Jews did not like to use it, but in Stephen's case they were anxious to put him to death by any means.

This was a very painful death for Stephen. Was God really with him at this moment? Did God forsake him? Could Stephen really sing, “How Firm a Foundation?”

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!

Yes, he could: God did not deliver Stephen from death but he did deliver him through death. Sometimes, as in the case of Peter and John, God delivers men from death but in the case of Stephen He delivered him through death. We will never know for sure on this side of glory why God delivered Peter and John from death and delivered Stephen through death. Yet, God is God and He does as He pleases in heaven and earth, and whatever He does is right.

There is the story of a Presbyterian missionary and his wife serving in the northern part of Ethiopia. One day, as they labored in a mission hospital, a band of rebels came and kidnapped the wife and a nurse who had been assisting them. The nurse was shot; the missionary's wife was held as hostage. As the husband, absolutely torn apart by what had happened to his young, pregnant wife, searched for an answer, he turned to Romans 11:33, and read it to the group around him. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”

HOSTILE OBSERVER Acts 7:58b

“And the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” -- This is our first introduction to the young, brilliant Pharisee Saul of Tarsus in the Book of Acts, although we have reason to believe that Saul was probably attending the synagogue where Stephen preached and he may have been part of the Sanhedrin. Saul of Tarsus, later to become the Apostle Paul, observed the stoning of Stephen because the stoners gave Saul their robes. Undoubtedly Saul had heard Stephen's address before the Sanhedrin and he despised everything Stephen said about Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Saul, however, could not get away from the truth that Stephen preached nor could he erase from his mind his beautiful countenance and spirit when he was stoned. Stephen was God's messenger to get Paul ready to become a Christian. Without Stephen, there would never have been an Apostle Paul. St. Augustine said, “If Stephen had not prayed, the church

would not have had Paul.” Saul hated all that Stephen stood for, “And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death” (Acts 8:1). We shall see in another message how God supernaturally intervened into Saul's life to save him, but it was Stephen who God used to prepare him for the time when he would be saved.

Out of Stephen came Paul. What seemed to be a human tragedy was used by God to be a great blessing for the church. Stephen's death meant the birth of Paul. Beloved, would you give your life in martyrdom or watch your children give their lives in martyrdom if you knew that from your death or their deaths would come great blessing for the church? Perhaps some great Christian leader would come through this kind of martyr's death.

How many of us remember the names Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian, Nate Saint and Jim Elliot? These men gave their lives in the reaching of the Auca Indians for Christ. It all seemed a tragedy but through their deaths the whole Auca tribe has been reached for Christ and thousands of young people in America were challenged to give their lives to missionary work.

This merely tells that the more the church is persecuted, the more the truth is rejected, the more the church grows numerically and spiritually. Augustine said, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” Tertullian said, “The more you mow us down, the more we grow.”

A few years ago when the rebellions were taking place in old Congo many nationals and missionaries lost their lives for Christ. The missionaries were driven out and the nationals were driven underground. At that time there were about 35,000 Christians in one province in Congo. When the missionaries returned about a year later, they found that the numbers of Christians had swelled to 70,000. “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.”

HUMBLE ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH Acts 7:59

“And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’” -- As he was being stoned, realizing death was imminent, Stephen prayed to the Lord and said, “Receive my spirit.” He was asking Christ to receive his spirit or the immaterial side of him into heaven. Death to a Christian is the passing of the human spirit and soul into the presence of Jesus Christ. This is very clearly taught in the New Testament.

“We are of good courage, I say, and prefer to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (II Cor. 5:8).

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philip. 1 :21).

At the moment of death, Stephen's spirit passed into the presence of Christ who was standing to greet him. Stephen did not say, “receive my spirit into limbo” or “receive my spirit into purgatory” or “receive my spirit into endless eons of unconsciousness during soul sleep.” No, he said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and Stephen knew he was passing into the presence of Christ forever.

John Calvin said, “It is an inestimable comfort to know that when our souls leave our bodies they do not wander about haphazardly, but are taken into Christ's safe protection, if only we place them in His hands.”

Notice that Stephen called Jesus “Lord,” a title for deity. He was saying in front of these Christ-rejecting Jews, “Jehovah-Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen prayed to Christ because Christ is God and he knew that only God had the power to give him or any man entrance into heaven. This is a clear testimony to the early Christian's certain belief in the deity of Christ.

Stephen died with a humble acceptance of death, knowing that he was going home to be with the Lord Jesus, his God. He did not fight dying, knowing that it was part of God's plan for his life. Stephen was not only delivered through death but he was delivered to death, for it was God's will that he should die. God had this whole situation under His control.

Stephen died in a way pleasing to God. He died in the midst of service to Christ. He died with a sweet spirit. He died a martyr's death which was pleasing to Christ. We should all desire to die with the same kind of attitude and, if God wills it, we should desire to die a martyr's death. Just as Stephen was calm, confident and fearless in the face of death so should each Christian display this same kind of strength at death. A positive attitude in Christ at death is one of the most powerful testimonies for Christ.

HEART FOR MURDERERS Acts 7:60a

“And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’” -- We are told Stephen cried out with a “loud” voice, but this was not so God could hear but so the crowd could hear. Why? Because Stephen wanted them to know he had the same spirit towards those who murdered him as the Lord Jesus Christ had towards His murderers who said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:24). Stephen wanted his killers to know that there is forgiveness for every kind of sin, even murder. Stephen had no bitterness and no resentment towards his enemies. He had learned the teaching of his Lord well which was, “Pray for your enemies.” “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Stephen, by saying, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them,” was showing to the unbelieving world that even in death God is doing the supernatural work in a believer's life to make him more Christlike.

How many folk there are who have had s. good testimony for Christ in life in their younger years but as they grew older they became embittered with life and grew cold towards the realities of Christ, so that they died a death not honoring to Christ. Often people as they grow older do not want to grow spiritually. They stay on a plateau and, therefore, they never get prepared to face death honestly and realistically and with a sweet spirit.

HAPPY SLEEP Acts 7:60b

“And having said this, he fell asleep.” -- Stephen died but this death is described as falling asleep. The Bible speaks of saints falling asleep but it never uses this term of unbelievers who die horrible deaths. It is the body which sleeps, not the spirit, for the spirit goes to be with Christ. The body waits the reuniting of the spirit of the dead saint at the resurrection. When Christ comes for the church at the second advent He will come with the saints; that is, saints who have died. “So that He may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (I Thess. 3:13). Christian death is referred to as sleep. When a man is literally asleep, he is still living. When he is asleep, he is resting. When he is sleeping, he is going to awake. Death for the Christian is sleep for the body and the removal of the spirit into the presence of Christ, waiting for the resurrection. Death, then, is falling asleep and waking up in Christ's loving arms.

Death in general is not as important to God as it is to us. God has the power to give and take life as He wills. However, the death of a saint is very important to God. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His godly ones (saints)” (Psa. 116:15). God is happy, delighted and hilarious when a saint dies because one of His children has come home to heaven. When death comes, we cry and display sadness (as we should) but these are selfish tears because of the thought of separation. Death to us may be painful. We may not like the thought of death and our human natures recoil at death because it is the last enemy, but God loves the death of a Christian. “Blessed (happy) are the dead who die in the lord from now on” (Rev. 14: 3).

CONCLUSION

Saved. What simple lessons can we learn from the death of Stephen? First, Stephen is a witness to the reality of the unseen and the supremacy of the spiritual. His life was not wasted. His life was not a tragedy. His life and death was a testimony to the glory of God. Second, a man does not have to have a long ministry to have an effective ministry. Stephen's ministry was cut short but out of that ministry came the Apostle Paul. Third, whether a Christian dies as a martyr or by natural causes, his death can powerful testimony to the unbelieving world which has no hope. Fourth, Stephen's name means “crown” in the Greek. Mr. Crown

received the martyr's crown, and will one day throw it at the feet of Jesus at the Judgment Seat. "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). Fifth, Stephen's life is a prototype of all Christian martyrs. The Book of Acts in one sense never closed and we are still writing it today. In this day and age, there will still be some God will cause to lay down lives for Christ. In our day and in our country, the opposition is sharpening, open hostilities towards Christ are emerging. The opposition is getting more vicious, more furious and more bold. As Christians continue to confront this world and our nation with the truth of Christ, the conflict will intensify, the depravity of man will become more evident, and the battle between light and darkness may break forth like a volcano erupting. We may find ourselves being martyred for the truth. Remember, there is a special crown for martyrs.

May we always be able to sing this hymn, For All the Saints:

"For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.

Thou wast their rock, their fortress and their might;
Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.

O, may the soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor's crown of God!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Unsaved. Are you without Christ? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you would come to faith in Christ by the testimony, preaching and example of Stephen? Recognize your need of Christ and turn to Him for salvation. Do not be stiffnecked and stubborn. Do not hold your ears from the truth. Please do not leave today without recognizing Him whom to know is life eternal. It is just as simple as saying, "Thank you Lord Jesus for dying for my sins. I take you as my personal Lord and Savior." In a moment of time you will pass from death to life, from darkness to light. May God grant you grace to make this decision for Christ.