

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Acts 7:44-60

Stephen was an eloquent and effective preacher of the gospel. Many of the cultured and religious aristocrats in Jerusalem would have been glad to have ignored Stephen, but they were unable to do so. On account of his bold and fearless testimony to the person, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ, certain enemies of Christ engaged Stephen in an argument. When the dispute arose, Stephen defended his Christian position with such wisdom and zeal that his opponents could not defeat him in debate. He so confounded them with his argument that they had no alternative but to acknowledge their errors or to silence him by force. To the latter method they resorted. They seized him, brought him before the Sanhedrin, bribed witnesses to swear that he was guilty of blasphemy, in order that they might put him to death.

It was the custom of that court to allow an accused person to plead guilty or not guilty, and to speak in his own defense. As they listened to his defense, these infuriated Jews were enraged by the boldness of this preacher and his unanswerable logic. Anger is natural when one cannot meet an argument or explain his conduct. Violence is often resorted to when reason fails.

The high-brows had never faced such a prisoner as Stephen. He spoke more like a judge than like a prisoner. He seemed more like an accuser than one being accused. Such an address was certain to bring blood, but Stephen's conscience had led him to the place where he regarded no price too great to pay for his convictions.

1. They were cut to the heart.

That does not mean that they were smitten with remorse for their sins, but that they were enraged by the boldness of this preacher. They were not convicted; they were frenzied. Their hearts were not moved by the Holy Spirit, but by Satan. They were cut to the heart because their pride was wounded. The accusation they had heard was an insult to them. Considering themselves God's chosen people, whoever accused them of evil must suffer the consequences. Anger is usually the proof of guilt, of prejudice, and of weakness.

2. They gnashed on him with their teeth.

They became so infuriated that they rushed on Stephen violently and tried to tear him to pieces. They had murder in their hearts. They were not willing for any man to expose their sins. There was about as much sense in their conduct as there would be in a sick man's anger at the doctor who tells him of his disease.

This has always been the tactics of Satan. The people killed the prophets who rebuked them. Herod killed John the Baptist because he pointed out Herod's sin and rebuked him for it. The Pharisees put Christ to death because he denounced them in their hypocrisy. The Jews reacted in the same manner toward the Christians. The martyrs went to jail and to their death because they unflinchingly exposed sin and called on men to straighten out their lives. Preachers were put to death at the stake in Europe until the whole continent was lit with a lurid glare. Our own country has stained its fair name by vicious reactions to men who have turned the light on the sins of men. When one exposes sin, he cannot escape the wrath of enraged evil doers.

3. They stoned him to death.

Discerning their reactions to his masterful exposure of their sins, Stephen remarked in substance, "You may put me to death if you desire, but you cannot prevent the doors of heaven from opening wide for me, nor can you interfere with Christ Jesus standing at the right hand of God to welcome me home, for already I have seen Him in that very position."

Only one scene in the Bible surpasses this one; only the death of Jesus is superior. However, there was much in common between the two.

(1) Stephen's dying vision.

It was real. Stephen was not leaving a false impression on his watchers. When a man faces death and eternity he will be honest, for that is no time for shams and deceptions. Perhaps Stephen's vision was natural. He had spent his life in close fellowship with Christ, so when he came to die it was a small thing for God to pull the curtains back and give him a little view of heaven.

What did he see in heaven? He saw the glory of God. He saw Christ, the same Christ who had lived on earth. Christ was at the right hand of God, and He was standing, as if He were ready to receive His follower.

He saw more in Christ than he had ever seen while He was on earth. He called Him "the Son of man." This is the only instance where any man called Christ by that name, though He often called Himself by that name. It was His missionary name, by which He was linked to humanity. Stephen saw, as he never had before, how much Christ loved humanity.

(2) Stephen's dying testimony.

The witness died, but the testimony lived on. It is still living and still bearing fruit. Such a testimony cannot be smothered by falling stones and howling mobs and dismal graves. Kind friends took Stephen out and buried him with tender hands, but they could not bury his testimony nor his influence. These led Paul to be saved a little later, and doubtless many others since Paul's day.

Such a testimony was not affected by the scoffers and skeptics who shouted for his blood. He was not ashamed nor afraid to lift his voice in behalf of Christ even though he knew it would cost his life. Such courage and loyalty will always win for Christ.

(3) Stephen's dying prayer.

Refusing to believe the truth which Stephen spoke, the furious mob surged like angry beasts upon the helpless prisoner, and rushed him out of the city to administer capital punishment by stoning him. As they pelted him with stones, he prayed and committed his soul into the keeping of the Saviour, whom he beheld in glory. Evidently, the first stones struck him while he was standing. As they continued to strike him he struggled to his knees and prayed for those who were taking his life saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

This prayer was a convincing proof of the transforming power of the love of Christ in the human heart. Stephen did not have any animosity in his heart toward the men who were stoning him to death. His attitude, like that of the Saviour on the cross, was one of pity, love and forgiveness. His supreme desire was to accomplish God's will in his life, and if that will included death for him, then he would welcome it. He had caught the spirit of Christ, and as he died he was filled with a great love for humanity. It was this spirit that Christ sought to kindle in the hearts of men.

Stephen had caught a glimpse of heaven, and no man can see heaven without loving men, even the worst of men, yea, the ones who were killing him. He had seen the angels and his face reflected their brightness, and he became homesick for heaven. He was facing eternity, and no man can face eternity without rising above the low and trivial things of this life. What were the insults heaped upon Stephen in the light of eternity? They faded forever out of his mind, and not a trace of resentment was left.

With unshaken courage, sweet composure, genuine faith and fervent love Stephen

went to his death in the prime of usefulness. After living beautifully, he died bravely.

One of the spectators who seemed to be delighted with the pitiless fury of the mob was Saul of Tarsus. He guarded the cloaks of those who assaulted Stephen. To say the least, by his presence, his silence, and his willingness to guard the garments of the murderers, Saul gave his hearty approval to Stephen's martyrdom.

This scene, so like unto the crucifixion of Jesus, was forever implanted upon Saul's mind. Stephen's demonstration of how a real Christian can die for Christ made an indelible impression on Saul. His voice in prayer never ceased to echo in Saul's ears. As Augustine said, "If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul." Humanly speaking, if Stephen had not prayed, Paul would not have preached.

But killing Stephen neither answered his charge, nor defeated his message, nor corrected any evils. The facts remained; the Jews seared their consciences and went on in their wickedness even though their accuser was dead. The killing of Stephen only scattered the gospel. It was like smiting a fire to smother it, but instead of being smothered, the fire is scattered and breaks out in new places. When they stoned Stephen, many of the priests became bold and accepted the faith. The persecution purified the church, and men learned then that "the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church." Russia has tried to kill religion by prisons, fires, and death, but she will wake some day to find that the roots of Christianity have grown deeper because the soil has been enriched by the blood of countless children of God.