

"A GREAT SERMON"

Acts 7:1-16

Stephen and Philip are the only deacons of whom we know much. Both were mighty men for God.

The Bible contains excerpts from many sermons by prophets, priests, apostles and others; but not one of these sermons deserves more careful consideration than Luke's brief summary of Stephen's address before the council. We cannot keep from being impressed by his fearlessness of man, his courage born of deep conviction, his freedom from Jewish prejudice, his knowledge of the Scriptures, his spiritual insight, his oratorical power, and his skill in argument. Concerning his great sermon two things are noteworthy:--

I. Its Characteristics.

1. It was courteous and respectful.
"Men, brethren, and fathers," seems to be a tame introduction to a group of murderers. But no minister has the right to take advantage of his pulpit to indulge in personal vilifications and spiteful slanders.
2. It was saturated with divine truth.
Where will we find a three-minute speech with as many Scripture passages in it? Every reference in it was verified by the audience's knowledge of sacred truth.
3. It was logical, pointed and clear.
It was not made up of a series of funny incidents; nor was it an effort to defend some vague and meaningless theory.
4. It was brief.
All the recorded addresses of the Bible are brief.
5. It was Christ-centered.
Every reference pointed to Christ. There was not a personal reference in it. There was one theme running through it all. The footprints of God were seen in history, and all were pointing toward the coming of Christ.
6. It was unsparing in its denunciation of sin.
There was no soft-pedaling, nor minimizing the guilt of Israel in her rebellion against God. Stephen made it clear to them that they must answer to God for their wickedness.

II. Its Consequences.

1. It probed the hearts of men.
They could no longer escape their sins. God's Word became a mirror that reflected the secrets of their hearts.
2. The witness died, but his testimony loved on.
God's workers are incidental, they pass away; but God's work is eternal and will go on forever.
3. The Sanhedrin never looked on Stephen as a prisoner at the bar of justice pleading for his life.
They thought of him as a divine messenger delivering a sacred oracle. He appeared more as a judge delivering a sacred charge than he did as a prisoner who was condemned to die.
4. His sermon precipitated the issue about Christ.
Men could no longer dodge it; they must come out and out for him, or come out and out against him. That was the day of the outburst of the persecution that drove

all of the Christians out of Jerusalem. It made the bold more bold, and the fearful more fearful. It made martyrs or traitors.

5. It was a sermon that would make men afraid to do wrong. One of the weaknesses of much modern preaching is that it does not make men afraid of sin or of rebellion against God. We must preach the love of God but not neglect to preach the justice of God.

Stephen completely ignored all the false charges made against him. He touched the mountain peaks of history as he covered a thousand years in a few tense minutes of inspired preaching. The effects of his sermon can be measured by the subsequent conduct of his hearers. To say the least, his sermon brought action.

Stephen called attention to a divine hand in history. It is an easy matter, as one looks back, to see the hand of God guiding the affairs of men and nations. The strange happenings of life may fill people with confusion and dismay at the time, but in later years they can look backward and see the wisdom of many things that seemed strange and even cruel when they were taking place.

Abraham was chosen as the one with whom to start because he was the head of the chosen race. God's call to Abraham is the only explanation of his strange behavior. No man had gone before and blazed a trail for him. The highest compliment that can be paid to him was that "he obeyed God." Obedience to God's will has not always been an easy thing, nor has it been a popular thing. In fact, it has often cost men all they had, and some have matched their lives against their obedience, but no such sacrifice goes unrewarded. Abraham's obedience stands in sharp contrast with some others who have refused to obey, and others who have obeyed half-heartedly.

Obedience is the test of faith, of love, of loyalty, and of dependability. Obedience to the Father's will was the highest note in the life of Christ. "I come to do Thy will, O God." "Not my will, but thine, be done." Christ makes obedience to the Father's will the test of our love. "If you love me, keep my commandments." When God called Abraham, obedience to that call seemed impossible and unreasonable. Only one thing drove Abraham on in the face of these things—he believed God. In this obedience he was the world's first great representative of Christ.

Next to Abraham's obedience and sacrifice of his son, his faithfulness shines out as a mark of relationship to God. He was called "The father of the faithful." That means he is the standard by which all men should gauge their faithfulness. His faithfulness was unshaken even while the storms of persecution broke on him. He was unflinching in his devotion to God even in a land of idolatry. He was faithful even when he could not see his way. He was faithful even when the divine demands seemed unjust and unfair. He was faithful even when the promises of God seemed impossible. On one occasion God said of him, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." What confidence God put in Abraham! Abraham trusted God, but God also trusted Abraham.

God's plan often seems strange. The Egyptian bondage for Israel, God's chosen people, has always seemed a strange thing, hard to harmonize with wisdom, justice and mercy; but as we look back over the span of centuries we can see many valuable reasons for it. Men can not read the meaning of all that transpires while it is happening; but, looking back, they can see the hand of God moving in it all.

God works out His plans in the lives of individuals. Strange things happen--things that seem cruel and inconsistent with justice and mercy; but after they have passed one can often look back and see how they were best. Men can only see at close range. They measure all things by their wishes, by the immediate present and by local conditions, while God sees all things as they fit into an eternal whole. The Jews often questioned the mercy of God while they were in bondage, but after their deliverance they never ceased to magnify His mercies during those dark days.

God's judgments often seem strange. He declared that He would judge that nation which held Israel in bondage, yet it was a part of His plan. When the Israelites went to Egypt they carried with them the divine message, and the Egyptians had the opportunity to learn about God and to worship Him, but they refused the message and killed the messengers. For this sin Egypt had to be judged.

Futhermore, the deliverances of God often seem strange. No fiction was ever more strange and interesting than the deliverance of the Jews from their Egyptian bondage. Three million slaves were given their liberty even against the wishes of the ones who liberated them. With one hand they held them, and with the other they paid them the price to leave their borders.

Neither Jews nor Egyptians could ever forget that last night of Israel's bondage. There was a dead child in every home and a dead beast in every field, save in the camps of the Israelites where the stillness was not disturbed by so much as the bark of a dog. Follow them in their flight across the Red Sea, on breadless marches and in waterless wildernesses, always under a canopy of God's cloud that was light by night and shade by day, that opened for them a path ahead, and built impassable walls behind them. How strange were the events of their deliverance!

In his summary of Jewish history from the creation to the time of Christ, Stephen went directly from Abraham to Joseph, although about five hundred years separated them. Between them lived some of the noblest men the earth ever knew; Isaac, Jacob, etc. The names Joseph and Jesus both mean "saviour" or "deliverer". Their names were prophetic of their life work. Joseph delivered his brethren from the wrath of Egypt and preserved them in their dangers and trials. Jesus delivered His people from their sins and sustained them in their temptations.

Joseph and Jesus were both the objects of undeserved hate. They were both criticized and falsely accused by their brethren. They were both betrayed and sold for the price of a common slave. They were both slandered and lied about unjustly and finally delivered into the hands of their tormentors by the men who should have loved them most. They were both made to suffer for crimes they never committed. They were both meek and uncomplaining under unjust persecutions. But they both maintained their honor and virtue in the midst of life's sorest trials. They kept their honor in the midst of dishonor; they kept their purity in the midst of impurity.

Joseph and Jesus were givers of undeserved blessings. They were both forerunners of their brethren, making provision for them who should follow later. What would Israel have found in Egypt if Joseph had not gone before them? What would we find in eternity if Jesus had not gone before us? They were mediators between their brethren and their king. Joseph spoke to the king for his brethren, and Jesus makes intercession for us. They both showed mercy where justice would have cried for their persecutor's blood. The hate of hell would have said, "Get even with them for what they did to you", but the love of heaven said, "Render good for evil." They were both peacemakers. Joseph said to his brethren, "See that wall(?)out by the way," and Jesus said to his brethren, "love one another," "Pray for one another," etc. They were both prophets of a better country. When Joseph came to die He called his brethren about him and told them of the promises of God.

So strongly did He believe them that he gave command that, when his brethren went, they should carry his bones out then. Jesus told His disciples of the Father's house where He would go to prepare a place for them.

Joseph, you recall, was the favorite son of his father. In the dream God had showed him that he was to be superior to his brethren. When Joseph foolishly told his dream to his brethren, their attitude toward him was one of hatred. They sold him into slavery, in order to get rid of him and his dreams, "But God was with him". God delivered him out of all his trials and troubles and brought him into favor with the king of Egypt by imparting to him super-human wisdom. Ultimately, Joseph became ruler over Egypt.

Stephen tells us of the great famine that operated over all that part of the world, and of the afflictions which it produced. When Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent his sons down there to purchase a supply. When Joseph's brethren came in search of food, he had them brought before him. At that time, he disguised himself and dealt with them harshly, although we are told, it broke his heart to do so.

"And at the second time Joseph was made known to his brethren." After demanding that every man leave his presence excepting his visiting brethren, Joseph made himself known unto them. And so deeply was he moved that he "wept aloud", so much so that the Egyptians and the house of Pharoah heard his sobbing. "And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence" Alas! their chickens had come home to roost. Their sins had finally found them out. That accounts for the fact that they shrank from his presence. That was the worst possible news to them. "And Joseph said unto his brethren, come near to me." What a difficult thing to demand! And to assure them that he was their friend, he added the words-- "I pray you." What words of encouragement! And they did come near unto him.

He said, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt." They were hoping that he would forget all about that evil episode, and spare them from the humiliating ordeal of imploring his forgiveness. Joseph forgave his brethren of their sins; Jesus forgave his enemies on the cross; Stephen forgave his enemies in the hour of his death. This explains the difference between the true servant of God, and those who are not.