

HOW TO KEEP CALM INSIDE

Acts 7:54-60

We are living in an age of tension and strain. Many people are sitting on the lid of their anxieties. Sometimes a trivial incident causes them to explode in tears or in temper. Everybody needs a method of keeping calm inside.

This cannot be done through sheer will-power. We may control ourselves and keep from outbursts, but will-power does not deal with the root of the problem. There is also plenty of shallow advice which does not go to the real root of the problem. The need is to find something which will help us to keep calm inside while it is impossible to remove the conditions which cause us to be anxious. It becomes a question, not of what happens to us, but with what we do with what happens to us. Therefore, to get at the root of anxiety, and to find the secret of keeping calm inside, we must get down to our fundamental outlook on life. Our Scripture lesson, which tells about the martyrdom of Stephen, should be very helpful in this connection.

Stephen was an eloquent and effective preacher of the gospel of Christ. His preaching enraged some of his hearers, as the preaching of the unvarnished truth will do anywhere and in every generation. Many of the cultured and aristocratic religionists 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 tried to get Stephen involved 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 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, and bribed witnesses to swear that he was guilty of blasphemy, fully intending to have him put 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 at the boldness of Stephen and his unanswerable logic. Anger is natural when one cannot meet an argument or explain his conduct.

These high-brows had never faced such a prisoner as Stephen. He spoke more like a judge than a prisoner. He seemed more like an accuser than one being accused.

They were cut to the heart because their pride was wounded. The accusation that they had heard was an insult to them. Anger is usually the proof of guilt and of weakness. 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 tactic of Satan. The people killed the prophets who rebuked their sins. 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. When one exposes sin, he will not escape the wrath of evil-doers.

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." What can give a man such inner calm as that when angry and hate-filled men are killing his body?

I. He had a great faith.

We do not know who influenced Stephen to become a Christian. But the Bible tells us that Stephen was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost." That initial faith had grown and developed till it filled his life, and the Holy Spirit had come into his life and pervaded it. If someone had talked to him shortly before he died, and asked him for the secret of his amazing calmness, I think he would have said that since his meeting with Christ Jesus everything was different, and everything was all right -- even the terrible wrongs of his enemies, even the fact that he was going to have to die a painful and cruel death. So many try to rest their faith on people or on principles, but people fail and principles are impersonal. If you are going to have calm in the time of crisis, you have got to believe in a personal God beneath whose wise providence "all things work together for good to them that love him."

II. He had given himself to the task of extending Christ's Kingdom.

So many people live so deeply in themselves, their own little concerns, and their own petty worries that they are never really happy. Stephen, as well as many of the other early Christians, got one great concern on his heart, and that pushed out the other little selfish concerns. That great concern was to do the will of Christ, and to let the power of Christ through into the lives of other people so that they might be remade too. The Scriptures tell us that "Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people."

I suppose that, at first, Stephen considered himself unworthy and unqualified for this service, but he went ahead anyhow, and Christ used him in a marvelous way. This became the passion of his life. He did not think it mattered much what happened to him, so long as Christ's Kingdom was extended.

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. The way he met his death was what touched Saul of Tarsus and showed him the power which Christ makes available to those who trust Him. People who love God and put their lives into building His Kingdom react differently to personal anxiety or trouble than other people do. With unshaken courage, sweet composure, genuine faith, and fervent love Stephen went to his death in the prime of his usefulness. After living beautifully, he died bravely, and Christ's Kingdom was extended by both his life and his death.

III. He lived a life of prayer until the end.

His Lord was in the other world, but he kept in close touch with Him through prayer. Because he knew the Lord so intimately, and had kept in close touch with Him through prayer ever since he first knew Him, he kept on praying even while he was being stoned. 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 stone 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." 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 welcomed it. He was facing eternity, and no child of God can face eternity without rising above the low and trivial things of this life.

There are people who never pray until a crisis is upon them. But you cannot have the calm which Stephen possessed without steady and consistent praying. Praying during

the ordinary days of life creates a deposit on which we can draw in the time of need. When you have been in touch with God through prayer in the early hours of the day, it is strange how much better the whole day goes, and how something which would otherwise have thrown you off will fall into its proper place.

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. 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.

When something occurs that disturbs you down to the roots of your being, do the following things if you want to keep calm inside.

1. Face it.

Look it squarely in the face and don't try to run away from it.

2. Take it to Christ.

Ask Him what He thinks about this. Bring Him into the picture instead of facing it all by yourself.

3. Commit it to Christ.

By an act of your will, hand it over to Him. Generally we hang on to our problems, as if our worrying about them would help us in solving them. Let us trust them to God in complete surrender of ourselves and of the problem.

4. Release it to Christ.

Let Him lift it from your mind. You will then begin to feel lighter as the burden of it is lifted from you.

5. Forget it.

Leave it with the Lord. Go on and do what He wants you to do, in your day's work, and in your service for others. If the thought of your difficulty comes back, remember that you committed it to the Lord, and He will show you anything more He wants you to do about it. He will give you the calmness which you need, and which comes only from Him.