

THE SECRET OF STRENGTH

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." Acts 7:55.

Stephen was a very attractive personality. He was one of the most beautiful and charming characters mentioned in the Bible. He embodied in himself the high qualities of Christian manhood.

There is no question about the popularity of Stephen among the early Christians. Stephen is introduced to us in connection with a quarrel at the church about the distribution of alms among needy widows. Complaint of partiality and unfairness having arisen, the apostles suggested that the Christians select seven men of unquestioned integrity, in whom they had full confidence, to look after the distribution of church funds and kindred matters. This procedure will allay all suspicions, and would enable the apostles to give their undivided attention to prayer and to the ministry of God's Word.

Doubtless many men were available for that assignment, but the first man the church selected was Stephen. It says much for Stephen that he was the first one to be chosen, and especially in view of the fact that he was a Gentile. No doubt they had already recognized his concern for the poor and the widows. Moreover, he was a man who was kind and gentle. At the same time he was a man of strength and power. One of the great things about the Christian faith is its capacity to produce personalities who combine gentleness and strength.

We are especially impressed with the courage of Stephen. In those days in Jerusalem it took courage to be a Christian at all. It took even more courage to accept an office in the church. Moreover, it took great courage to do what Stephen did repeatedly, and that was to join in public controversy with the enemies of the Christian faith. Stephen must have known that his repeated successes against the enemies of Christ were building up hatred. The day came when his enemies hired men to bear false witness against him. It was clear that the same plan which had brought about the death of the Lord Jesus was now being applied to Stephen. Stephen did not flinch, but, in the face of the identical council which had condemned Jesus to death, he spoke out fearlessly. Not for one moment did he hesitate in loyalty to his Lord. He defied them to their faces, speaking the words they knew to be true, but which they refused to accept: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7-51).

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 viewed such a person as Stephen. He spoke more like a judge than a prisoner, more like an accuser than one being accused. They were cut to the heart because their pride was wounded. They became so infuriated that they rushed on Stephen violently and tried to tear him to pieces. They were not willing for any man to expose their sins. No man can expose sin and escape the wrath of an evil-doer.

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." Stephen's courage remained strong to the last. He deliberately chose death for the Christian faith. Because he possessed this amazing courage and loyalty to Christ, multiplied thousands of others have been challenged to a like faithfulness in the years that have followed.

What were the sources of the phenomenal courage shown by Stephen?

I. His Knowledge of the Bible.

That day Paul was impressed tremendously by Stephen's courage, and by his knowledge of the Bible. No doubt Paul rejected Stephen's interpretation of the scriptures at the time just as much as did the others, but the truth Stephen spoke burned itself into his soul. Paul watched that truth bring Stephen to his death, and it gave him the courage to face death in a way he had never seen anybody face death before. Not very long after that Paul had to capitulate to the same Lord Who had conquered Stephen.

Stephen studied the great heroes and heroines of the Bible, particularly men like Joseph and Moses. All of the men whom he mentioned had a strong and practical faith in God. In tracing the long records of those whose names appeared in the Old Testament, Stephen saw the good hand of God upon His people. He saw God working out His own purpose. No doubt Stephen believed that in the mighty plan of God, and in the light of all the promises of God, he could well lay down his life, without it being wasted. If nothing else, a knowledge of the Bible helps us to see life clearly and in its entirety. More than that, it helps us to remember that eternal issues are involved in everything that happens to us. The man who looks at life in the light of eternity will not panic in the passing crises of this world, and he will be faithful to the point of dying, if that becomes necessary.

II. His Implicit Faith in Christ.

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 Spirit." If someone had talked to Stephen 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 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. If you are going to have a calmness in the time of crisis, you must believe in a personal God beneath whose wise providence "all things work together for good to them that love him." Because of his faith in Christ there was a fine intimacy between the Lord and Stephen. They delighted in each other. Stephen also believed in and trusted people, and they in turn believed in and trusted him. One who puts a question mark after the name of others may rest assured that others will put a question mark after his name. Stephen willingly believed in Christ and was sustained by Him. Christ gave him courage to endure to the very end of life.

III. His Empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 7:55 informs us that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. His numerous graces and his many excellent qualities were the result of his being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. According to the sacred record, the Holy Spirit gave Stephen power, grace, and wisdom. His power was shown in the great wonders which he did among the people. But nowhere was the power of the Holy Spirit more manifest than in the courage which Stephen showed as he went to his death. Because he was strong in the Lord and had the courage to lay down his life for the Christian faith, Stephen was the instrument in the hand of the Lord in winning to Christ the most violent enemy of the Christians, Saul of Tarsus.

If you would like to know the real secret of Strength, which will enable you to live as Christ would have you to live, Stephen's precept and example challenge you to gain all the knowledge of the Bible possible through prayerful study thereof, exercise an implicit faith in Christ, and yield yourself fully to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.