

## The First Martyr.

Acts 6 and 7

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In the touching story of Stephen, the first of a long line of martyrs, we see the complete exposure of the wickedness of Israel on the one hand, and the display of the blessedness of Christianity on the other hand.

In the course of his address, Stephen recalls the history of Israel to show that the flesh, even in the professing people of God, invariably resists the man that God is with. This he proves from Scripture by recounting the way the patriarchs had treated Joseph, and the way the nation had resisted Moses.

The patriarchs, moved with envy, hated and persecuted Joseph. But God was with him, and highly exalted him. In his exaltation Joseph sends a message to his brethren presenting himself as their saviour and deliverer. Thus Joseph becomes a striking type of Christ, their own Messiah, whom for envy the leaders of Israel had delivered up to be crucified. But God had exalted Christ to His own right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, and from His place of exaltation there had come, through the Holy Spirit, the offer of repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 5: 31, 32).

Then Stephen recalls the history of Moses who, in order to help his own people whom he loved, turned his back on all the glory of Egypt. But Israel "thrust him away" and "refused" the one that God had sent to be "a ruler and a deliverer". In the wilderness they would not obey him but in their hearts turned back to Egypt. Thus again they resisted the man that God was with.

As we listen to Stephen's address we learn the true character of the flesh, whether in the believer or unbeliever, for the flesh never alters.

It is marked by "envy", for the patriarchs in rejecting Joseph were moved by envy; it is ignorant of the mind of God, for when God would deliver Israel by Moses, we read "*They understood not*" (25); it is openly hostile to the man that God is with for we read concerning Moses that Israel "*thrust him away*" (27, 39); it is governed by sight in contrast to faith, for Israel said, "*Make us gods to go before US*" (40); and it rejoices in its own works rather than in the work of God, for we read that, having made an idol, "*they rejoiced in the works of their own hands*" (41).

Having reviewed the history of Israel, Stephen concludes his address with a solemn exposure of the condition of the nation. They are rebellious against God — a "stiffnecked people". Whatever outward show of religion they may make, inwardly the flesh is unjudged; they are uncircumcised in heart, and their ears are deaf to the word of God. Thus, he concludes, they are a people who "do always resist the Holy Spirit". As their fathers had done so do they. The fathers had persecuted and slain the prophets, and the children had betrayed and murdered their own Messiah. Moreover the law, in which they boasted, they had not kept.

Up to this point, in the history of the Acts, the Apostles had by the Holy Spirit proclaimed the offer of repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nation of Israel from the exalted Christ, and, they were told, that, if they repented, Christ would come back and bring in the times of refreshing (Acts 4: 19-21). This final testimony, for that generation, is utterly rejected. The witness of Christ's heavenly glory is cast out of the city and stoned without mercy. Thus as the witness of Christ on earth had been rejected, so the witness of the Holy Spirit come to earth from the exalted Christ is now rejected.

Thus, for the time, all is over with Israel, and the testimony of God is no longer to Christ reigning on earth, but to Christ glorified in heaven. The position of Christ will ever determine the position and blessing of His people. Is Christ reigning on earth, then His people will be earthly and their blessings take an earthly character. Is Christ glorified in heaven, then His people will belong to heaven and their blessings will have a spiritual and heavenly character. Thus, at this great crisis, we pass from Jerusalem as a centre, where Christ was crucified, to heaven where Christ is glorified. In the great ascension scene, described in the first chapter of the Acts, two angels say to the disciples, "why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" for the door was still open for the earthly blessing under the reign of Christ if the nation repented. Now, for the time, all is over with Israel, and Stephen rightly looks up to heaven and no angels will call in question his heavenward gaze.

Thus we pass from Judaism to Christianity, from earth to heaven, from Christ reigning on earth to Christ exalted in glory. A new era begins during which believers are called out from Jews and Gentiles to form the Church united to Christ in heaven. During this period God has no earthly people, no nation in relationship with Himself and no temple as an earthly centre. Alas! Christendom has sought to act on the old footing and revive Jewish ritual. We have countries spoken of as Christian nations, and favoured people, and again magnificent cathedrals have been erected which are called houses of God, and Christianity is viewed as merely a religious system for the improvement of man's social position and the betterment of the world.

It is of the deepest importance to apprehend that Christianity calls us out of the world and gives us a place in heaven. As believers we shall only be practically saved from earth as we realise that we have a place in heaven. As the Apostle Peter can say, "An inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, *reserved in heaven* for you". No evil can touch this fair inheritance; no power of the enemy can rob us of heaven.

In Stephen we see set forth a believer who enters into the new Christian position, the heavenly position, and the character consistent with this position. Thus we do well to ponder the brief but instructive story of this the first Christian martyr. He comes before us marked in a striking way by Christian qualities, for He is described as a man "full of *faith* and the *Holy Ghost*", "full of *grace* and *power*", and marked by "wisdom" (Acts 6: 5, 8 N.Tn., 10). These are the outstanding marks of a Christian. Faith, of necessity, comes first, but having believed the gospel of our salvation we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. Having the Spirit we are exhorted to "be filled with the Spirit". If filled with the Spirit we should be marked by the grace that meets every evil in the spirit of Christ, by power to rise above every circumstance, and the wisdom to meet all opposition. Such Christ-like qualities will not bring the possessor into favour with mere religious profession: so it came to pass that "there arose certain of the synagogue" who "stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and brought him to the council." Here false witnesses charge him with speaking blasphemous words against Moses, against God, against the temple and against the law.

How will Stephen act in the presence of these violent acts and lying charges? All the council turn to look at Stephen. Will his face depict indignation and resentment in the presence of these lying charges? How will his Christianity stand the test of such an ordeal? To their surprise they see no trace of resentment or proud contempt on that face. Looking stedfastly on him they saw his face as if it had been the face of an angel. They saw a face lit up with the light of heaven. We may well challenge our hearts as to how we should have looked and acted under such terrible circumstances! Is it not possible that, in the presence of such gross and wicked charges rising indignation in our hearts would betray itself in angry looks? What, we may ask, was the secret power that enabled Stephen to look like an angel when opposed by the Devil?

This brings before us four outstanding marks of Christianity, when lived in the power of the Holy Spirit, so blessedly set forth in Stephen in the closing scene of his life described at the end of Acts 7.

First, the Christian, full of the Holy Ghost, will be one that *looks up stedfastly to Christ in heaven*. He realises that all his resources are in Christ — the Man in the glory. He does not look within in the vain endeavour to find something in himself in which he can trust. He does not look around to find support and guidance in others. He looks up, and he looks up stedfastly. He realises that in Christ in glory there is One who is the Head of His people with all wisdom to guide, who has the heart with all love to sympathise with them in their sorrows, and who has the hand with all power to support them in their trials. So the Apostle Paul, at a later date, exhorts us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us looking stedfastly on Jesus the leader and completer of our faith" (Heb. 12: 1, 2). We are running the race that ends in heaven, and in that race there will be trials to meet and insults to endure, and it is only as we, like Stephen, look up stedfastly into heaven and fix our gaze on Jesus that we shall be able to endure. Thus in Stephen we see set forth the great fact that if the Holy Spirit came down from Christ in heaven it is in order to lead our hearts up to Christ in heaven.

Let us, however, remember that Stephen who looked stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God and Jesus, was a believer who not only was sealed with the Holy Spirit, but was "full of the Holy Spirit". One has said, "To have the Holy Spirit, is one thing: to be filled with the Holy Spirit is another. When He is the one source of my thought, I am filled with Him. When He has possession of my heart, there is power to silence what is not of God, to keep my soul from evil, and to guide in every act of my life and walk" (J.N.D.). Thus being full of the Holy Ghost Stephen looks up to Christ in glory. He does not behold the glory with his natural vision, he was full of the Holy Ghost. But let us remember that this is not confined to Stephen for says the Apostle, "*We all* beholding the glory of the Lord are changed into His image."

Secondly, the believer that looks up stedfastly to Christ in the glory will be *a man that is supported by Christ in heaven*. This does not necessarily mean that the Christian will be kept from trial. He may, indeed, be allowed to pass through the most terrible trials, even as Stephen who was falsely charged with blasphemy, cast out of the city, and stoned out of the world. But if Stephen is not kept from trial, he is sustained in the trial and brought through the trial. In these terrible circumstances he realises the truth of the Lord's words, "When thou passest *through* the waters, I will be with thee: and *through* the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest *through* the fire, thou shalt not be burned" (Isa. 43: 12). Thus, with the stones falling upon him, Stephen is called to pass "through the valley of the shadow of death": but he fears no evil for the Lord is with him to support him, and glory is before him.

Thirdly, sustained by the Lord, the Christian becomes *a man that is representative of Christ in heaven*. Gazing upon the Lord in glory we are changed into the same image from glory to glory. It is only as we are looking at Christ in the glory that the world will be able to look upon us and see something of Christ. Thus Stephen becomes like Christ — the One, Who, in His humiliation was charged with blasphemy but witnessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate, and, "Who when He was reviled, reviled not again; and when He suffered He threatened not". Stephen, with his eye stedfastly fixed upon the Lord, follows in the steps of the Lord. When reviled he utters no taunt, and when he suffers he pronounces no threat. No hard thoughts arise in his heart; no black looks mar his face; no bitter words fall from his lips. One has written, "He bears witness to his Master, forgetful of himself, or his danger, without a thought of consequences. His heart was filled with Christ to the exclusion of care for his life, or what should follow. Christ was the only object before Him" (J.N.D.). Thus, gazing upon the Lord in glory, Stephen becomes changed into His image, and like the Lord, he

prays for his enemies, and commits his spirit to the Lord. Thus the man on earth becomes representative of the Man in the glory. He looks up stedfastly into heaven and sees Jesus in the glory, and the world looks stedfastly on Stephen and sees Jesus in Stephen.

Lastly we see that having represented Christ, and his race run and his course finished, the Christian is one that *departs to be with Christ in heaven*. So Stephen falls asleep and his spirit is received by Christ in the glory. The path of suffering for Christ leads to the glory with Christ.

Thus we see in Stephen a beautiful setting forth of true Christianity according to the mind of the Lord. We see that a believer, filled with the Holy Spirit, is one that will carry out the words of the Lord, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." Entirely occupied with Christ, such an one will, like Stephen, deny himself, make no effort to save his life here, and will follow Christ into the glory. He *looks to Christ in the glory*; looking to Christ, he is *supported by Christ in the glory*; supported by Christ, he becomes *representative of Christ in the glory*, and having finished his course, *he departs to be with Christ in the glory*.