

Stephen the Christian Proto-Martyr

Acts 6, 7.

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I trust it may be of profit as well as interest to look a little into the inspired account of so blessed a saint. This closes the first phase of the church, confined to Jerusalem. Philip's work opens the second, when the word of grace goes to the Samaritans and farther still. The Gentiles are to hear through (not only the great apostle of uncircumcision, and the mission of Peter too, but) the free action of the Spirit in such of those scattered by the persecution as evangelised the Greeks also in Antioch.

Acts 5 attests power in every form: the Holy Spirit that indwelt the church avenging by Peter hypocritical deceit within, followed by blessing inward and outward; unseen power delivering the injured apostles from the world's persecution; and power over men's hearts as in Gamaliel's intervention.

Increase of numbers was followed by internal weakness: the waning of love, and the rise of jealousy, were it only fed by so slight a difference as that which divided the home-bred Jews from those who freely used the Greek language and the Greek version of the scriptures, the Septuagint. "There arose a murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily ministrations. And the twelve, having called the multitude unto them, said, It is not proper (or, pleasing) that we, forsaking the word of God, should serve tables. Look out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men attested, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we will set over this business; but we will persevere in prayer and the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and, having prayed, they laid [their] hands on them" (Acts 6: 1-6).

The daily ministrations of food* grew out of that singular and touching fruit of the Spirit produced among the saints since the day of His descent at Pentecost. For all that believed were together and had

all things common, selling their possessions and substance for distribution to all, according as any might have need; and this in pure grace, not by requirement. To carry out the duty holily and efficiently needed time and judgment as well as diligence and wisdom, especially as the sphere extended daily. The apostle justly felt that it was not for them to curtail the claim of prayer and the ministry of the word. Hence men of God, not set in their place, might profitably devote themselves to this labour of faith and working by love, without which nothing can go well, even for external things.

*It is straining scripture with Bp. Pearson to make these tables partly ecclesiastical; and to say as Bp. Wordsworth of Lincoln did is to mislead, that "having been so chosen and ordained, they performed the sacred functions of baptizing and preaching the word" (Acts 8: 36, 38). Scripture nowhere connects the Eucharist or Lord's Supper with these or any other officials; and Philip's baptizing followed his evangelizing, not his office as one of "the seven" the attempt to assimilate with the modern diaconate being as great a failure as to find warrant for the other two orders.

Here we have to remark the wisdom with which the apostles ruled. They did not choose the seven men of attested fitness for the work. They bade the multitude of their brethren to look out such men, full of the Spirit and wisdom. Yet they gave it an official stamp which neither the whole multitude, nor any individuals but themselves could confer, as acting for the Lord, the source of their own apostolic authority. For the apostle was in the highest degree, not only a gift from the ascended Christ, but an authority called to confer it also in His name. "The seven" were no immediate gift from the Head to the church, like evangelists or pastors and teachers (Eph. 4). They had a charge needing appointment by the due authority; and so the apostles established them in their place of administration which concerned earthly wants, and lent them solemn ground of responsibility in the eyes of all as well as their own. But the multitude of the disciples chose them.

It was not so in the case of elders or presbyters, as we learn from Acts 14: 23; where the apostles Paul and Barnabas are said to have "chosen" (compare Acts 10: 41; 2 Cor. 8: 19) elders for the disciples in each assembly. Accordingly, when the apostle left Titus in Crete to act for him in his absence as an apostolic delegate, he directs him to set or establish elders or bishops in every city as he gave him charge. In other words, the apostles directly or indirectly chose and set the elders in their places. The multitude did not act. Elders were chosen for them, and established by apostolic authority.

There was nothing arbitrary nor inconsistent, but a divine principle in each case. It was the multitude which gave the funds for the public distribution. To all therefore was given a voice in the selection of acceptable ministrants. This in no way applies to elders. Theirs is a question of spiritual, moral, and even circumstantial qualities fitting them to preside or rule. Hence for choosing right men a nicety of discernment was requisite, which was far beyond the saints generally, and, if we bow to scripture, reserved to an apostle or his delegate. Gifts (δώρα) were given directly by the Lord: whether those that laid the foundation, as apostles and prophets; or those that build on that foundation, as evangelists, pastors and teachers, who needed no such apostolic establishment as the local charge of "the seven" or that of the elders.

Though "the seven," for an office peculiar to the state of things then existing in Jerusalem, are not called "deacons," their work was generally analogous to that which was designated by the latter term, when the peculiarity vanished. The deacon was the regular title for those charged with the duties of external service; and so appropriately styled. If grace for such a work is overlooked, the diaconate degenerates into a mere demand for business tact to the dishonour of God in the church, helping on the descent to the world's level.

The word of God, with the prayer which drew down application in power and unction, was the

fitting work of the apostles. Men might beat and threaten worse; but it was in vain to forbid or oppose their speaking in the name of Jesus, seeing they were witnesses that God raised up and exalted by His right hand Him whom the Jews by instigation of the priests slew by hanging on a tree: God must be obeyed rather than men. "They therefore went their way from the council's presence, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonoured for the Name: and every day in the temple and at home they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus [as] the Christ" (Acts 5: 41, 42).

But remembrance of the poor saints is precious in the Lord's sight; and it was wise and gracious to cut off occasion from those that murmured. The twelve, like Paul later, were as the rule averse from meddling with money, and only touched it under strict provisos that the ministry might not be blamed. But what do we see here? If Hebrews of course in Jerusalem preponderated over Hellenists, it is notable that the names of all "the seven" whom the multitude chose, and the apostles appointed with prayer and hands laid on them, seem Hellenistic. If they were not Hebrews (for we know that Andrew and Philip among the apostles were not Hellenists), it was grace abounding practically, not man's way of prudent compromise. Now grace inspires confidence as it expels suspicion. Grace indeed is to the Christian and the church what law ought to have been to Israel. But the heavenly people no less than the earthly forgot their calling; and judgment will surely be executed on the evil at His coming who is to be exalted with His own in heaven and on earth. Though it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come; it will not tarry.

The appointment was followed by marked blessing on the word of God, so that the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was very greatly multiplied; and a new evidence appeared of which nothing was said till now: "a great crowd of the priests obeyed the faith." We should not be justified in inferring that they as yet in the least suspended their sacerdotal duties in the temple, but rather that the truth gave them more zeal and conscientiousness in their discharge. It was at a comparatively late day, and in fact only a little before the destruction of Jerusalem that they received the call to go forth unto Jesus without the camp, bearing His reproach, and possessed of no abiding city here, but seeking the one to come. How little they yet realized that this one sacrifice for sins now supersedes, because it more than fulfils, all sacrifices!

Another fact of immense moment came to view. "Stephen, full of grace and power, wrought great wonders and signs among the people." That divine energy had nothing whatever to do with his being one of "the seven," for this was simply and solely to serve tables and care for the widows, etc. But as hitherto many wonders and signs were wrought by the hands of the apostles (Acts 2: 43, Acts 5: 12), so now did Stephen in Jerusalem and Philip afterwards in Samaria (Acts 6: 8, Acts 8: 6, 7). Yet we have no ground to suppose that so it was with the other five. In neither Stephen nor Philip had this divine energy to do with their duty as official curators, but with the teaching of the one, and with the preaching of the other who is elsewhere described as "Philip the evangelist" (Acts 21: 8), which is not said of Stephen greatly gifted as he was. But his power in wielding God's word was great, and roused the determined opposition of others, as it must in such a world as this, where His word pierces the conscience.

And there rose up certain of those of the synagogue that was called of freedmen, and of Cyrenians, and of Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke." Power is not noisy or vainglorious, but makes itself or rather God and the truth felt, which the devotees of form and tradition cannot endure. Hence their animosity has recourse to the basest means as here. "Then they suborned men saying, We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God; and they roused the people and the elders and the scribes. And coming upon him they seized and brought him unto the

council, and set false witnesses saying, This man ceaseth not speaking words against the holy place and the law. For we have heard him saying, This Jesus the Nazarene shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us. And all that sat in the council, gazing on him, saw his face as an angel's face" (Acts 6: 9-15).

Clearly the spiritual activity of Stephen in Jerusalem, as of Philip outside, was wholly distinct from their official functions: so much so, that it appears to be the express aim in these chapters to intimate this very working of the Spirit in power and liberty, that all saints might know the rights of the Lord Jesus, and God's mind for their guidance. They each had received a gift from Him, as all gifts come, and were bound to exercise it to His glory. Unbelief, regarding Him as a hard man is afraid, goes away, and hides the talent in the earth; whereas the man of faith knows Him to be a good and faithful Lord, becomes a good and faithful bondman, and gains for His pleasure in the measure of his own grace and fidelity. Such is the principle of all Christian ministry. It is the exercise of a gift, confiding in the Lord's goodness

and zealous for His will and honour; and such as are faithful over a few things, as Stephen and Philip, shall surely have His gracious recognition in that day (His day), be set over many things, and enter into the joy of their Lord. Office in due order, to which competent authority alone can validly appoint, is quite another thing, and from its nature is a local charge. But gift from the ascended Lord has no such restriction, as scripture amply proves; and so even the parable implies in its manner, under the figure of going and trafficking or gaining by trade with the talents entrusted by Him.

It was a principle of marvellous value not only then but for any time among Christians, that the Lord so wrought directly and placed His servant so wrought on in immediate dependence on Himself by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The fact that all the apostles were there, and that they had appointed "the seven" to an honourable office, only gave the greater effect to the Lord's giving to at least two of them a gift not given (it seems) to the other five, who were ministers of the tables, as two were also of the word.

"There are distinctions of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are distinctions of services, and the same Lord; and there are distinctions of operations, but the same God that worketh all in all. But to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for profit. For to one through the Spirit is given a word of wisdom; and to another a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; and to a different one faith, in the same Spirit; and to another gifts of healing, in the same Spirit; and to another Working of miracles; and to another prophecy; and to another discerning of spirits; and to a different one kinds of tongues; and to another interpretation of tongues. But all these things worketh the one and the same Spirit, dividing to each in particular according as he pleaseth" (1 Cor. 12: 4-11).

Christendom looks to form and office, and overlooks the living power of the Lord Jesus, which thus wrought then as He works now, seeing that He is alive again for evermore. And. it is written that we may believe and obey: for the Spirit who is the agent of power was sent forth to abide for ever; and He is faithful to His work in thus glorifying Christ.

It would seem from the false accusation that Stephen was led of God beyond even the apostles in seeing and following the power of the Christian testimony. He may have profited by the Lord's prophecy on Olivet beyond the four who heard, or by other kindred discourses of our Lord, which no doubt in some way percolated among the faithful and convinced him that the temple was doomed to fall, and the Jews to suffer a still wider dispersion than to Babylon. This might readily give occasion to a charge of blasphemy; and the allusion in chap. 7 to the prophet's words confirms it. All proves that he was a teacher of marked intelligence and power.

THE APPEAL: ABRAHAM

Acts 7: 1-8

It is notable how mild was the challenge of the high-priest. He like the rest seems for the moment overawed by the radiance that shone in Stephen's face. It could not but have reminded them of Moses at a critical point in Israel's history as well as of his own; and now he was accused of speaking against Moses, the sanctuary, and the law, yea of threatening the temple's destruction.

"And the high-priest said, Are these things so? And he said,* Brethren and fathers, hearken. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he, was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, Go out of thy land and out of thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee. Then going out of the land of the Chaldeans he dwelt in Haran; and thence, after his father died, he removed him into this land in which ye now dwell. And he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot-plant; and he promised to give it him for a possession, and to his seed after him when he had no child. And God spoke thus, that his seed should be a sojourner in a strange land, and they shall enslave them, and entreat [them] evil four hundred years. And the nation to which they shall be slaves will I judge, said God; and after these things they shall come out and serve me in this place. And he gave him a covenant of circumcision; and thus he begat Isaac and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob, the twelve patriarchs" (vers. 1-8).

* It may be needed to point out that there are only two classes here addressed, elders and youngers, "men" applying to both by a well-known idiom.

It might seem astonishing (if we did not know from God what the heart is) that so many men of ability and learning have failed to apprehend the admirable power and nice relevancy of Stephen's answer. But evidently the inspiring Spirit attached to it signal importance, as shown in more space devoted to it than to any other in the book of the Acts. Its force as an appeal to Jewish conscience assembled in council, sealed in Stephen's blood, is another though awful proof of its cogency. Had it consisted of, or only contained the "demonstrable errors" which some have dared to impute, it must have fallen at once through its own impotence under men's contempt. Not so; it was the energy of indisputable truth which pierced through forms to their hard hearts; as it roused their indignation to white heat, when their own sad history of unbelief, disobedience, and opposition to God was proved from holy writ to be as applicable to their present state as it had been to their forefathers in early days.

"The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia. What unanswerable evidence of sovereign grace! To overlook it springs from a wicked heart of incredulity in turning away from a living God, and hardens the soul in self-sufficiency, so that His voice is distasteful, disliked, and dreaded. Yet had they not often heard and read Joshua's testimony (Joshua 24: 2, 3)? "Thus saith Jehovah, the God of Israel, our fathers dwelt of old time beyond the river, Terah father of Abraham and father of Nahor; and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from beyond the river, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac." Assuredly it was not Stephen who slighted Jehovah's call of him who was to be dignified pre-eminently as "the friend of God." It was many centuries before the law, far away from Canaan, expressly before he dwelt in Haran; it was in Mesopotamia, infamous as the mother of idolatries, and the prison to which idolatrous Judah was sent, judicially, captive, for that sin.

Nothing can be conceived finer than the exact discrimination given to this holy man of God in beginning with Abraham. He first was not only chosen by grace, but called out of open departure from the true God, from country and kin devoted to other gods, to be the head of a family, and at length a people, whether in flesh like Israel, or (when Israel lost place for a while by apostasy) by believers

spiritually as now separated to God for Himself, His own peculiarly. It was first outward, first what was natural, not spiritual which only came to light when the Jews rejected their own Messiah. The principle was plain in Abraham, though even in his case darkened and delayed by yielding to human feeling. For though he went out of his land, he did not get out of his kin, but dwelt with his father in Haran till Terah died. Then only God removed him into the land in which the Jews gloried as their dwelling.

It was not so with Abraham. He was a pilgrim and stranger in Canaan; and this by divine design: so far was Jewish boast from God's mind which Abraham enjoyed by faith. Faith brought him out of the land of the Chaldeans; but how in Canaan? "By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise as not in his own [land]; for he looked for the city which hath the foundations" (Heb. 11: 8-10). The Jews, like unbelievers at all times, are on the ground, not of faith but of tradition and external privilege. But the God of glory gave Abraham no inheritance in it, not even a foot-plant, and He promised to give it him for a possession, and to his seed after him when he had no child. Abraham thus lived on promise and walked by faith, not by sight. This has its highest form and power in Christianity; and its opposite is in Judaism as then, especially in such as hated Stephen.

How strange that any Christian should be so dull as not to perceive that this very exordium is brimful of what exposes the Jewish antagonists of fighting against their own scriptures and the God who sent the Lord Jesus in their hatred of the gospel testimony! We shall see that all the statements which the chapter records follow up the same yet ever-growing evidence urged on their hearts, if peradventure they might hear and live. But none are so impervious as those who rest on an ancestral religion with godly men in the line, who suffered in their day for their living faith from those who had not faith, the predecessors of those who resist the truth today.

"And God spoke thus, that his seed should be a sojourner in a strange land, and they shall enslave and entreat [them] evil four hundred years. And the nation to which they shall be slaves will I judge, said, God. And after these things they shall come out, and serve me in this place." At no time was there a more conspicuous proof of God's interest in them, than during those centuries, and the time of deliverance studded with miracles and still more glowing prophecies which followed: a time in every way striking both in Egypt and in the wilderness, but entirely apart from establishment in the land of promise. Never was there a more awful display of His displeasure and of blows in His wrath which befell their oppressors. Never was there a more wonderful witness in the past of His adoption of Israel as His own people, redeemed from the world's bondage, and its then mightiest and proudest monarch. When was a people like Israel carried through the desert by His own constant presence and faithful care, spite of as constant refractoriness even to rebellion on their part, kept as they were solely by Him with not a merit or a resource of theirs?

As His mouth had threatened judgments on injurious enslavers, so did His hand perform in due season. And this dealing of Jehovah the God of Israel fills the Law, and the Psalms, and the Prophets, which predict yet greater glories to come when they own not only their idolatrous evil but the still more heinous one of rejecting their own Messiah. Could any line of argument more lay bare the character of Jewish opposition to Stephen, or more powerfully support his testimony? For "this place" where they were to do Jehovah religious service in Acts 7: 7 was as different as possible from "this holy place" or "this place" in Acts 6: 13, 14. The one had the magnificence of "great stones and costly," and the splendour of gold and rich array; the other, the awe-inspiring and evident display of divine majesty in the true God proclaiming His law to His people in the wilderness of Sinai. Was the sublimity greater in Jerusalem or the temple from which the glory has departed? "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." Men are apt to boast when they have least ground for it, every true reason for humiliation; and this was Stephen's plea.

Another word is added in ver. 8, the pertinence of which one could not expect to be felt by those who only see the surface of scripture. "And He gave him a covenant of circumcision; and thus he begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob, the twelve patriarchs." God after the deluge had established His covenant with Noah and with his seed after him; "and with every living soul that [is] with you, of bird, of cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that go out of the ark — every beast of the earth;" henceforth, no flood is to destroy the earth. Of this everlasting covenant God set His bow in the clouds (Gen. 9) as sign. It was God's covenant with nature, and as permanent as nature itself for an earth inaugurated by sacrifice (Gen. 8). But the covenant with Abraham, of which circumcision was the sign, had a far deeper significance.

Important as God's institution of government was for man on the earth, the foundation of a stock in Abraham, separated from demon worship to the one true God, the Almighty, to be their God in their generations for an everlasting covenant, was incomparably more so. But even this was far from the narrowness to which Judaism reduced it; for if the covenant of circumcision was with Abraham, he should be father of a multitude of nations, and kings should come out of him. Hence its sign was not to be in the clouds for every eye to see, but in the flesh, with which it dealt war to the knife, proclaiming death on it as unclean; not merely purity demanded, but death in figure of Christ's death for His own, naturally as unclean and ungodly as others. It was not of Moses but of the fathers, as the Lord told the Jews (John 7: 22), proud of the law which none of them really kept, as thus too all came under its curse. But as a shadow, whereof Christ was the substance, it was most instructive, as the confession of flesh cut off unsparingly to be God's people, instead of the vain endeavour to ameliorate it by ordinance, morality, or philosophy.

With Abraham therefore circumcision began and was to be perpetuated in his seed after the flesh, and even with any stranger born in their house, the imperative sign of Jehovah's covenant in his flesh. But the Christian enjoys it in the better way of the spirit, circumcised with circumcision not done by hand, in the putting off of the body of the flesh in the circumcision of the Christ (Col. 2: 11). Here we are carefully told that "thus he (Abraham) begot Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day" (the day of resurrection and its glory according to that new estate for the believer according to the counsels of grace). In Gen. 15 he believed God, who reckoned it to him for (or, as) righteousness; he had been called out, and obeyed the call, as separated to Jehovah, both in uncircumcision. But it was after his circumcision, and in the full order of the covenant that he "thus begot Isaac and circumcised him the eighth day." So it went on henceforth regularly in the line: and Isaac [begot] Jacob; and Jacob the twelve patriarchs. It was a privilege conferred on strangers, on slaves; though so requisite for every male in Israel that he who neglected it was to be cut off from his peoples for his breach of the covenant. Who best maintained its spirit — Stephen, or his adversaries? Who can intelligently aver that Stephen beat the air in this brief outline? Great men are not always wise, indeed never so, when they judge scripture.

JOSEPH AND HIS PATRIARCHAL BRETHREN.

Acts 7: 9-16.

At this point the defence carries us on to the first of two signal types of our Lord, which yield overwhelming evidence to every true heart and exercised conscience.

"And the patriarchs, envying Joseph, sold him into Egypt. And God was with him, and delivered him out of all his tribulations, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt;

and he appointed him chief over Egypt and all his house. But a famine came upon all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and great distress; and our fathers found no food. But Jacob, having heard of there being corn in Egypt, sent out our fathers first; and at the second [time] Joseph was made known to his brethren, and the family of Joseph became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and called down to him his father Jacob, and all [his] kindred, seventy-five souls. And Jacob went down into Egypt and died, he and our fathers, and were carried over to Sychem (Shechem), and laid in the sepulchre which Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Emmor of (or rather, in) Sychem" (vers, 9-16).

Here it is no question of unclean Canaanites or oppressive Egyptians, nor is it the failure of a saint through amiable feeling, or the pinch of want. The heads of the tribes of Israel betray their evil state from the first. Nor was there any just ground of provocation, but insubjection to the father, hatred of their godly brother, and rebellion against the mind of God. They envied Joseph and, even when they gave up their deadly purpose, sold him away into Egypt. Pride of position hates the faith that rebukes it, the spirit of grace in deed and truth, and proceeds to enmity beyond measure, more cruelly than the world.

Not a word does Stephen say of the Lord Jesus, yet who could fail to see the parallel between the Just One, and the guiltless object of patriarchal jealousy? Could any one doubt that his was no ingenious device to serve a desired turn, but the unquestionable lesson of their own scriptures? Had not the first book of the law God's moral aim and spiritual purpose in laying bare the base conduct of the fathers, and the sufferings of Joseph? Even their scribes did not limit scripture to a passing person or circumstance; the Pharisees confessed its divine authority; the chief priests, the elders, and the doctors of the law owned that under the surface it is full of reference to the Messiah, the hope of Israel. To confine it to its more immediate bearing literally was to deny its prophetic character, and betray oneself a sceptic or Sadducee.

So plain and direct were the facts in Genesis that it was enough to state them with all brevity. Yet when they are duly weighed, their more profound application becomes apparent; and God's design thereby is as important for souls as it is worthy of Himself. Israel's wickedness through unbelief is as manifestly foreshown as Messiah's humiliation and rejection by His brethren. Such was Stephen's thesis, which he could not but speak out if he cared for the Lord and for their souls. Disdain it they might, but it was just the truth they needed then as they do still. But if the Jews be prominent as they are, Gentiles share the same sin. It is at bottom the common guilt and ruin of all mankind, as the cross proclaims.

Equally certain is it, that as God was with the abhorred Joseph, so was He in all fulness with Jesus, the object of divine delight as He was the depositary of wisdom to His glory; and when delivered out of all His tribulations deeper than ever befell any, God highly exalted Him and set Him at His own right hand. But if it was not the Israelitish kingdom, of which Zion is the centre, this only confirms the propriety of the type. It was the administration of a kingdom wholly different from the day when He shall be the one king of all the earth as well as of the chosen people, coming in manifested glory on the clouds of heaven. That day is in no way arrived, as it surely will. But the despised and rejected One is exalted on His Father's throne, not yet on His own; and He has all authority over a kingdom as extensive as the world in a form quite special which He received when cast out and separate from His brethren. Of this Joseph's exaltation by the king of Egypt is the striking shadow, made chief over Egypt and all his house.

But as Joseph predicted in his sphere, so did the Lord in His far higher and greater deal with all the world. Yet famine and great distress of every kind His grace can use for even that mercy and

blessing. But in order to be blessed the sinner must feel his evil state, and Himself work too that He may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from him, deliver his soul from going to the pit, and give him to see the light. Food for the inner man is only from Him, as the sons of Jacob found none in Canaan; and their father, bearing of it in Egypt for the fulfilment of divine purpose, sent them there, where Joseph had provided for a famished world, and his heart yearned to supply his father and his brethren, little as they knew who sold him away there. They thought evil against him; but God meant it for good, and to preserve them a posterity in the earth and save their lives. How much more was this verified in the greater than Joseph!

Nevertheless the blindness was to pass from the guilty brothers. No thanks to them, but to his grace who on the second visit was made known to them. So it will be for the Jew when the Lord fulfils, yet exceeds, the type as He ever does. The repentance will be as deep as their faith will be living. "And I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and of supplication; and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him as one mourneth for an only one, and shall be in bitterness for him as one that is in bitterness for a firstborn." How touchingly even the type exhibits this inward word in Judah's plea with Jacob that Benjamin should go as was required, and with Joseph for Jacob when he owns that God had found their iniquity, offering to abide as bondman in lieu of Benjamin! How yet more when Joseph weeping aloud made himself known to his brethren! Yes, it was to save their lives, and many more, with a great deliverance.

Nor was this all. "In the best of the land," said the great king, "make thy father and brethren to dwell" . . . "And Joseph placed his father and his brethren in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded." For this type looks at a far wider circle of blessing than Canaan; just as the rejected Son of man is destined to have dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages, should serve him. Compare too Isa. 49 — "It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth." But this in no way hinders the special honour and nearness of Israel; for the Gentiles shall bring Zion's sons in their bosom, and carry his daughters on their shoulders; 19 and kings shall be thy nourishers, and their princes thy nursing mothers. They shall bow down to thee with face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet." This future earthly glory however is not at all noticed by Stephen, who speaks here to conscience in view of Jewish unbelief and sin against the Lord, as this only was then seasonable.

As no small objection has been taken to verses 14-16, suffice it to say that Stephen cites the number (75) of Jacob's kin, not as the Hebrew gives it (70), but as in the Greek version, the Septuagint, which adds these to the two sons of Joseph in their descendants, etc. It is only a further addition; as in the Hebrew itself we find 66 as well as 70 according to a differing point of view. The difficulty in the last clause of ver. 16 is more considerable, and lies mainly in the name of Abraham where Jacob might have been expected with burial of his sons in Sychem. That Stephen was ignorant of the Hebrew enumeration (66, and 70), or confounded the sepulchre in Hebron with that of Shechem, is too absurd save for a rationalist. How impute it to one so perfectly at home with the inspired history, not only in its obvious facts, but in their spiritual and prophetic import, to which the natural mind in the learned is as blind as it is in the unlearned? It was not without motive that he should draw attention by the way to the burial of the heads of the tribes, not with their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but in the seat of their Samaritan rivals. To account for the insertion of Abraham here, and for the peculiar description of the purchase from the sons of Hamor in or of Sychem, is another thing.

APPEAL TO MOSES NEXT.

Acts 7: 17-28.

Still more prolonged is the use made of an even fuller type of Messiah. This we may examine according to the three divisions of his life; each of forty years, in Egypt, in Midian, and in the wilderness.

"But as the time of the promise drew near which. God assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until there arose a different king over Egypt who knew not Joseph. *He* dealt subtly with our race, and evil-entreated our fathers, to make their babes outcast that they might not live. At which season Moses was born and was fair exceedingly [unto God]; and he was nourished three months in his father's house. And when he was cast out, the daughter of Pharaoh took him up and nourished him for her own son. And Moses was instructed in every wisdom of Egyptians; and he was mighty in his words and works. And when a space of forty years was being filled to him, it came up on his heart to visit his brethren the sons of Israel. And seeing one wronged, he defended and avenged him that was oppressed, smiting the Egyptian. And he thought that his brethren would understand that God by his hand was giving them deliverance; but they understood not. And the next day he appeared to them when contending, and urged them unto peace, saying, Ye are brethren: why do ye wrong one another? But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who established thee ruler and judge over us? Dost thou wish to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian yesterday?" (vers. 17-28).

The time of promised deliverance drew near, but it was not yet come. A different king over Egypt arose, who knew not Joseph, and looked askance at the growth and rapid increase of the Israelites. The providence of God raised up a fitting instrument for His merciful purpose. But even Moses must learn dependence on Him, and that neither the advantage of his person, nor the training in Egypt's wisdom, nor the court influence of Pharaoh's daughter, could avail to effect that purpose to His glory. Yet who was ever more strikingly marked out by divine providence, and who had better human means and opportunities? Though an outcast for death, he nevertheless was nourished by the princess royal as her own son. Not only instructed in all that Egypt could teach, but mighty in his words and works, who so proper as he by the favour of the king to lead God's people peacefully, out of Egypt and their frontier sojourn to the promised land? But no: this would have been man's method and the world's wisdom to the praise of Moses' genius and prudence, and in no way a foreshadow of Christ.

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ: as Joseph was a witness of it even in Canaan, so was Moses now in Egypt. "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be evil-entreated with the people of God than have temporary enjoyment of sin, accounting the reproach of the Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he looked off unto the recompence" (Heb. 11: 24-26). Thus grace wrought in practical righteousness; it ought ever to do so in the believer, as it perfectly and always shone in Christ. It was in Moses the eminent proof of his faith, relinquishing advisedly every gain which providence had given him of a circumstantial kind, that no flesh should glory, but that he who glories might glory in Jehovah. Nor was it only that he turned his back on the world's power, splendour, and pleasures, for Jehovah, leaving any charge of ingratitude to the royal preserver and munificent patron of his life up to mature manhood. He chose to suffer affliction with the people of God, His poor faulty people in their present low and degraded estate, rather than enjoy what was sinful and ungodly. He appreciated the actual bond of God to His people, and unreservedly acted on it in faith. Grace enabled him not only to see but to do the truth.

The reasoning of prudence would have kept him where providence cast his lot without will of his

own. Faith pierces through all such pleas or excuses, because it follows God's love to His own, even in their abasement; as Christ did thoroughly, who never yielded to premature energy but waited in patience, suffering meanwhile to the uttermost. Any other principle however it be disguised is worldliness; and Moses is a blessed sample of fidelity, whatever mistake may have mixed up with it. The word to the Christian is plain: "not minding high things, but going along with the lowly." It is the very reverse of "condescending" to them; for this retains pride of place while affording countenance. Compare our Lord's words in Matt. 20: 25-28. "Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Thus holiness to God is ever separateness from evil, but also identification in heart and way with His people. But faith is now tried, and its path never long runs smooth. And here we are shown that Moses, when about forty years old, had it on his heart to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel; and seeing one wronged, he defended and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian. Hating unrighteousness, he punished the oppressor of his brother, heedless of the consequence. But the following day his love met a rude repulse, and this not from an Egyptian but from an Israelite, whose wrong was now worse; for he rejected the intervention of Moses to make peace, when he spoke to their heart of their unworthy contention. He that did the wrong to his neighbour — it is ever so — resented the love that sought their good, and thrust Moses away. He did worse still. "Who," said he, "made thee a ruler and a judge over us? Wilt thou kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian yesterday?"

The time of deliverance was not yet. Moses so far was mistaken. He had not yet fully judged himself; he unconsciously was off his guard in using his might in words and deeds. The people must be brought down lower — must cry to God under their bitter burdens, the Egyptians be forced to wish Israel good, and proud Pharaoh be crushed to nothing under God's mighty hand. Moses thought that his brethren would understand that God by his hand was giving them deliverance. But they understood not. And this is a far more searching trial than any fear of Egyptian anger. The Lord, who never failed, as Moses and others, suffered incomparably more than all from His people's unbelief, yea from His apostles' inability to understand Him, till He died and rose and sent His Spirit from heaven to lead them into all the truth. Man despised Him, and the nation abhorred. "We hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not."

The saddest and most painful thing was His brethren's alienation. In this Joseph and Moses were types of Him; but each in a somewhat distinct way, the better to foreshow Him. Joseph was separated from his hating brothers, to rise through a humiliation still deeper where he was as a man that has no help, cast away among the dead and remembered no more. From all this he rose at once to be the highest next to him on the throne, quite outside Israel over the Gentiles. Moses was forced to flee from his brethren who would have valued his turning to account the world's influence, and cared not for his going down in love to share their affliction. But his heart was ever with them in his separation from them, and awaited the time to return for their deliverance from Egypt. Nor can any fact more clearly mark the difference than that he called his son Gershom, "a stranger"; while Joseph called his eldest Manasseh, "forgotten." For such Moses was, in no way settled down in Midian; but his affections were with his poor brethren, and he looked for the day when by his hand deliverance would come for them.

In Joseph's name for his eldest we have the other side of what was so fully verified in Christ; for God had made him forget all his toil, and all his father's house; as the second was named Ephraim, or fruitful, in the land of his affliction. But Gershom expressed that Moses was a stranger in a strange land, and Eliezer's name only comes in later, My God a help, when Moses under Jehovah's power had

delivered the people. So carefully does the inspiring Spirit deign to keep us even in typical shadows from the narrowness of the human mind or will, and lead us on to delight in the largeness of divine grace in our Lord Jesus.

MOSES IN MIDIAN.

Acts 7: 29-35.

Moses then was rejected like the Messiah, rejected by his own people, God's people, for whose sake he had given up his earthly ease, honour, and prospects. His faith was thoroughly of and in God, yet to be vindicated in due time. But the energy that slew the Egyptian evil-doer was before the season, and gave occasion to the heartless Israelite to repel his gracious intervention and expose him to the vengeance of the oppressor. Moses must flee from his beloved but unworthy brethren, and wait on God's time and word in a strange land. He had not yet learnt to say, like the perfect Messiah, "Waiting I waited for Jehovah."

"And Moses fled at this saying, and became a sojourner in the land of Midian where he begat two sons. And when forty years were fulfilled, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sinai, in the flame of fire of a bush. And Moses as he saw wondered at the vision; and as he went up to consider, there came Jehovah's voice, I [am] the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. And Moses, all a trembling, durst not consider. And Jehovah said to him, Loose the sandal of thy feet, for the place on which thou standest is holy ground. I surely saw the ill-usage of my people that [is] in Egypt, and heard their groaning, and came down to take them out. And now come, I will send thee unto Egypt. This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who established thee a ruler and judge? him God sent a ruler and a deliverer (or, redeemer) with the angel's hand that appeared to him in the bush" (vers. 29-35).

The second period of forty years is full of spiritual instruction for us. Moses must learn the nothingness for God of that long span of his early life when trained in all wisdom of the Egyptians. Might in his words and deeds of that sort had no worth in His eyes, that no flesh should boast before God; that according as it is written, He that boasteth, let him boast in Jehovah. It is what answers to the Christian principle, My grace sufficeth thee; for power is perfected in weakness, as its exercise must take its start from the word of the Lord, as one is guided by the Spirit. Thus is it obedience, without which is nothing that glorifies God. This is all the more striking, because in Egypt it was during the earlier period that we read of that distinctive faith, which, as it flowed from God, also delighted Him, of which we have the record in Heb. 11: 24-26. Yet the spiritual dealing that follows is as invaluable for the soul in His service, as the blessing that lays the foundation for it is indispensable. Natural energy, which is man's glory, must be judged in and by the saint to God's glory. Then ensues true practical dependence on God, and the felt need of His direction. Even thus, when the call comes to act for God, what hesitation, and even shrinking, and sense of difficulty to the verge of unbelief! What a contrast with his self-confidence in the earlier days!

But it was not only the wilderness as the scene of continuous trial, nor. the quiet seclusion with God which the lowly life of a shepherd furnished, to unlearn as it were what Egypt had taught, nor the long daily proof to humble and prove what was in the heart (so blessed to Moses who bowed, and so fatal afterwards to Israel who did not bow). Moses had God's manifestation in the way most suited to the work given him to do, in a flame of fire out of a bush that burned but was not being consumed. It was holy ground: Moses was told to unloose his sandals from off his feet, and heard he divine voice

say, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. It was for the fathers' sakes to whom He had pledged His promise and whose God He was. But He had also heard His people's cry under bitter oppression, and came down to deliver them. They indeed groaned and sighed by reason of the bondage; but they had not the faith to cry to Him. Yet their cry came up to God; and God heard their groaning, and remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, which they had forgotten, long sunk in the darkness and idolatries of their cruel masters. But God looked on the sons of Israel and acknowledged them, and called His servant Moses, at this point of their depression,, to the great work of crushing the pride of Egypt, and pouring contempt on their gods in the redemption of His people.

But more we may note in passing: observe the force of his quoting the call to unloose his sandal. Holy ground is where God manifests Himself. It was not merely Jerusalem. So Jehovah decided with Moses in Midian; so afterwards with Joshua when he crossed the Jordan. Their idolising the courts of the sanctuary was out of season. But religious pride is like other pride, and often lifts its head higher in abject poverty. And the case of the Jews who charged Stephen falsely with blasphemous words against the holy place was yet more desperate and unfounded. For they had rejected their own Messiah, and God had raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand, far above every principality and authority and power and lordship, and every name named not only in this age but also in that to come, and subjected all things under His feet, and gave Him as Head over all things to the church. Hence the centre of divine glory and attraction is no longer on earth but in heaven. What once had holiness relatively has lost it by unbelieving contempt of the Lord of glory, whom both the Jews and the world's princes crucified. The only holy place God owns now, as faith too accepts, is above where Christ is. But though Stephen does not argue here but simply cites the scripture they all acknowledged, they are thus each way shown without excuse in their petty and malevolent jealousy. God's words exposed and refuted any such charge of blasphemy.

Jehovah must take the initiative. It must be manifestly His work, as Moses had learnt. And he became a type of a greater than Moses, as Joseph too before him, in being rejected by and separated from his brethren so dear to him, before God used him to become their ruler and deliverer. In very deed this was, for the cruellest and haughtiest of Pharaohs was raised up to show him His power, and that Jehovah's name might be declared in all the earth. Instead of energy to go forward, Moses was hesitating and diffident in the extreme, and the people hearkened not for anguish of spirit and from hard service. It was Jehovah that set out in tender words and with all assurance His undertaking Israel's cause, not only to deliver them from their sorrow under Egypt's oppression, but to bring them up out of that land unto a good and spacious land, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.

No doubt another reason was before His all-embracing mind. Gross evil enveloped that goodly land: abominable idolatry with most debasing immorality. Jehovah would judge the iniquity of the Amorites, while He made Israel to take possession of the land, which had been so plainly marked out from Abraham's day for his descendants. Yet the O.T. yields ample evidence that Joseph and Moses were but types, and that all that Israel have yet enjoyed is but provisional, and, as far as the people and kings were concerned, an utter short-coming till He come who, fulfilling these types and many more, will bring in the blessing for Israel, no less than accomplish the judgment on their enemies. Then too shall be the higher glories of the heavenly things, and the boundless reconciliation of all things, over which Christ is the appointed Head, who will share all with the glorified heirs of God and joint-heirs with Himself.

This, as Eph. 1 clearly shows, is the true purpose of God as made known to the Christian. The future kingdom, with Israel as His earthly centre over all the nations is but a part of it, and if it engross

the mind, necessarily drags down to the earth to no small loss. For God has made known to us, what He did not in the law and the prophets, the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself for administration of the fulness of the fit times: to sum (or, head) up all things in the Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth. Nor is our part confounded with either, but associated with Christ. Therefore is it added "in Him, in whom we also obtained inheritance, being marked out before according to the purpose of Him," etc. We are Christ's joint-heirs, and sealed with the Holy Spirit for redemption's day.

MOSES IN THE WILDERNESS

Acts 7: 36-43

In the last forty years of Moses the evidence adduced is no less striking both morally and typically to convict the Jews from age to age of the same unbelief and rebellion, and to display the ways of God in Christ, notwithstanding their self-will and blindness. "Who [is] a God like unto Thee that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth [in] mercy. He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities, and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, the mercy to Abraham, which Thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old" (Micah 7: 18-20).

Here the scene lies mainly in the desert, after Israel's redemption through Moses' power in Egypt. "He led them out, having wrought wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness, forty years. This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, A prophet shall God raise up to you out of your brethren like me. This is he that was in the assembly (or, congregation) in the wilderness, with the angel that spoke to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers; who received living oracles to give us, to whom our fathers would not be subject, but thrust [him] aside, and turned back in their hearts unto Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make us gods who shall go before us; for this Moses, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him. And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their hands. But God turned and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven, as it is written in a book of the prophets, Did ye offer me victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? And ye took up the tent of Moloch and the star of the god Raiphan, the figures which ye made to worship them; and I will transport you beyond Babylon" (vers. 36-43).

When things are at their worst for the Jews, not only the apostasy but the lawless one, the antichrist revealed, and the godless of Christendom and of Judaism worshipping Satan and the man of sin as the true God in His temple, a greater than Moses shall appear to the destruction of His adversaries and the deliverance of an afflicted and poor remnant, who, small though it be, shall become a strong nation, as He will hasten it in His time. Not only will He redeem Israel from the hand of the enemy, but gather them out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Wonders and signs shall be, not in one land only but for all the world, "signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the sea roaring and billows, men swooning from fear and expectation of what is coming on the inhabited earth; for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming with power and great glory." "And the Redeemer will come to Zion, and unto those that turn from transgression in Jacob;" and Jehovah's covenant with them, being of His own grace after their manifest and utter ruin, will be from

henceforth and for ever. So Jehovah says: what matters that which others say?

Now professing Christians are not entitled to prophesy smooth things for themselves, but to learn that they happened to Israel, and were written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the ages are met. For are the saints waiting in patience for Christ, dependent and subject to Him who is gone on high? Do they not act as if they wet not what is become of Him? and instead of being led by His word and Spirit, have they not set up calves of gold, idols to go before them, rejoicing in the works of their own hands? And has not God delivered by far the majority to worship images, pictures, crucifixes, dead men's relics, angels, saints, and the Virgin Mary, like Israel serving the host of heaven as madly as any heathen?

Consider the serious lesson in what Stephen quoted from the Greek Version of Amos 5: 25-27. When the Spirit of prophecy set forth their coming captivity, He goes back, not to the wicked kings of Israel, nor to shameless sons of David who ruled Judah, but to the idolatry in the wilderness at the very time when they outwardly honoured the tabernacle of Jehovah and the priesthood of Aaron. But God saw all the while the hollowness of their victims and sacrifices in His name; for in their hearts and secretly, they took up the tent of Moloch and the star of the god Raiphan (or, Romphan), the forms which they made to worship them. However God may wait in His admirable patience, it is the early unjudged sin that decides, though the execution of judgment may not come for many centuries afterward. The writings of the earliest uninspired men of the Christian era prove the fallen state which undermined and destroyed the apostolic teaching; whilst the centuries that followed kept ever growing worse and worse, till the highest arrogance sat enthroned on the ruin of the church's heavenly association with Christ in entire separation from the world.

If it was rebellion against Jehovah for "our fathers," as Stephen pointed out, to renounce subjection to Moses and thrust him away, and turn in their hearts unto Egypt, how much more heinous is the guilt of those who read but reject the Lord's ways in worship and service for their own pandering to the world and man's will in divine things! Is not the Holy Spirit now sent from heaven to be in and with us for ever in glorifying the Lord and His written will? The true question for the saint is, not comparing the evils of this or that denomination in order to choose the least offensive, but to cleave to Him with purpose, obedient to His word, and counting on the Holy Spirit's readiness to help, guard, and guide to God's glory.

THE TENT EXCHANGED FOR THE TEMPLE

Acts 7: 44-50

The worship of God according to the ritual of the law was no security against idolatry, as Stephen proved from the words of Amos the prophet, who goes back to the days of Moses in the wilderness for the sin which transported them after long patience to the lands of captivity. "The holy place and the law" were in vain for God's glory then as now; this was his answer to their boast, and his defence to their accusation. But he had far more to say, and as conclusive that faith in Christ was and is the true safeguard.

"Our fathers had the tent of the testimony in the wilderness, as he that spoke to Moses appointed to make it according to the model which he had seen: which also our fathers, receiving in their turn, brought in with Joshua when they entered on the possession of the nations, which God thrust out from our fathers' face unto the days of David, who found favour in God's sight, and asked to find a

tabernacle for the God of Jacob. But Solomon built him a house. Howbeit the Most High dwelleth not in things made with hands, according as the prophet saith, The heaven [is] my throne, and the earth footstool of my feet: what house will ye build me? saith [the] Lord (or, Jehovah); or what a place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things" (vers. 44-50)?

Stephen, far from denying, insists that the tent of the testimony was made as God appointed by His word through Moses according to the model seen above, and that their fathers, receiving it from those before them, brought it with them when they entered on the possession of the Gentiles thrust out from before them, till the days of David, whose son built the house for the God of Jacob. But he no less insists on that to which the Jews were blind according to the prophet Isaiah: that the Most High does not dwell, save figuratively, in places made with hands. For the heaven is His throne, and the earth but the footstool of His feet. They exaggerated in what they had done, and forgot that He made all these things, which far outdo any structure of man. So that when they abused and perverted the outward form, He gave it up to the Chaldeans, as He would again to the Romans. Could their vain trust meet a sterner rebuke than God had already given and would give? For that Stephen knew our Lord's threat of the destruction soon to fall on the temple who can doubt, though He purposely lets the truth tell without His name in all this speech? It was His rejection that was shadowed in that of Joseph and of Moses; and now is shown God's rejection of the earthly house: each one the proof of Israel's unbelief and rebellion against Himself, which is Stephen's plea and demonstration throughout.

But there is more, and what could not be hid, the triumph for the truth in each case at the last. For, as we have seen, the rejected Joseph is raised to the height of power in the larger sphere of the world which Egypt figures, yet full of gracious care for Israel owning him at length; and the rejected Moses is made their redeemer and judge to lead them as a people set free from the house of bondage. And we may add the house of God, no longer "a den of robbers" as the Jews made it according to their own prophet's witness, is to be "a house of prayer for all the peoples." For then the Messiah is no longer despised, but "exalted, and lifted up, and very high" not only in Israel's eyes, but to the astonishment of many nations, and kings shutting their mouths at Him. Yea "from the rising of the sun even to its setting, my house shall be great among the nations of the earth; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure oblation; for my name shall be great among the nations, saith Jehovah of hosts."

How striking that no inspired writer applies Malachi's text to the gospel (as some do *ad nauseam*), but leave it for the day, when the kingdom is restored to repentant Israel! Both the renewed waiting for Christ's coming, and the immense growth of apostate unbelief, proclaim how near the time is. See the extraordinary contrast which never was as it is now. For the cry is gone forth at midnight: "Behold, the bridegroom! Go forth to meet him." There have been times in Christendom when the dreaded day was thought arrived (and so it was on a small scale in Thessalonica till the apostle corrected the false report. So it was in the Middle ages more than once. So it has been at a recent day. But what has this in common with the revealed hope of the Bridegroom? Terror reigned then through consciences far from purged and at rest in His love; and so it must be when He is revealed in flaming fire when the day of the Lord dawns on a guilty world. But the Bridegroom's coming has associations of joy in itself, and for all who watch, however feebly; and grace takes care that those who are truly His awake and with trimmed torches welcome Him.

If others prefer to say, "My Lord delayeth to come," we may and ought to grieve over an unbelief which betrays a liking for present things. But in presence of a hope which attaches to His person, His grace and truth, we need not occupy ourselves with contention. His word is plain enough, though tradition is a broken reed which if leaned on fails and pierces. But having His Spirit by grace, let us

cleave to Him and the word of His grace.

APPEAL TO CONSCIENCE

Acts 7: 51-53

We can see from the use made of the prophet Isaiah respecting the temple, what an advance was made by Stephen, beyond the Twelve even as the spiritual precursor of the apostle Paul (dead in sins as he was then, and the avowed antagonist of Stephen). But now he speaks directly to the conscience of the Jews, exasperated by his trenchant application of the O.T.

"Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers, ye too. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand concerning the coming of the Righteous One; of whom ye now became betrayers and murderers, being such as received the law at angels' ordinances (or, injunctions), and kept [it] not" (vers. 51-53).

Loving and devoted even to death that his Jewish brethren might judge their sins and receive the grace of God in Christ, he thus delivered the most scathing summary of the people's sins from first to last. Yet he did not go beyond what all, in whom God spoke from Moses to Malachi, had testified here and there in their pleadings with them for the glory of Jehovah. With all their self-complacency they were "stiff-necked" in heart and ears. The outward sign in the flesh only made their total lack of its spiritual meaning more glaring. The flesh was strong instead of being judged as evil.

It was themselves who were resisting the Holy Spirit, "ye" pre-eminently. Without doubt, as already proved from Holy Writ, their fathers had so done: this ought to have been a warning to them. Alas! they also followed the same baneful course; and they did so "always." They had no just sense of God's grace in calling out Abram. They were like their ancestors who opposed Joseph and Moses. They broke the law, before it was deposited. They resembled the generation which had the tent of the testimony in the wilderness, but did homage to false gods. They boasted of the temple of Solomon, but rebelled against the Most High who is far above all that the hand makes. They killed the prophets who announced the Messiah; and in their own day they did worse than all before them by delivering up and murdering the Righteous One Himself.

It was no exceptional outbreak, but their habit. And so the Lord had told them in Matt. 12: 31, 32. "Every sin and injurious speaking shall be forgiven to men; but speaking injuriously of the Spirit shall not be forgiven to men. And whosoever shall have spoken a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this age nor in that which is to come." The evil and adulterous generation only waxed worse, after Christ's atoning work; so that when they spurned the gospel, nothing but judgment could be their portion; partially when the Romans under Titus took away both their place and their nation; fully under Antichrist, when the mass perish, and a believing remnant becomes a strong nation, the generation to come.

God's faithful grace had raised up true prophets in face of the many false, and those were persecuted by their fathers as faithless as themselves. Could they mention one who escaped that lot? And if any were more than usually gifted and privileged to announce beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, they were killed by their unrighteous ancestors who could not endure His coming to destroy them and their idols, with the corruptions in their train. Their rebellion against Jehovah and His

anointed had only very recently culminated in their cry (not like those who said, Blessed be He that cometh in the name of Jehovah, but) Crucify, Crucify Him, "of whom ye now became betrayers and murderers." Yet He was the Holy One who, as He drew near and saw the city just before, wept over it, saying, "If thou hadst known in this day, even thou, the things which belong to thy peace! but now they are shut out from thine eyes. For days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall make a palisaded mound round about thee, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children in thee, and shall not leave in thee a stone upon a stone, because thou knewest not the season of thy visitation."

And what was their glorying in the law but a vain and empty boast? They received it no doubt with the most solemn inauguration at Sinai. He shone forth from Paran, and He came from the holy myriads: from His right hand went forth a fiery law to them; or as Stephen said of their characteristic position, ye "received the law at angels' ordinances, and kept it not." A law that is not kept must only condemn the guilty. What blindness to brag of a law which they did not obey! But so it ever is, where man without faith in the Saviour pretends to honour God. There can be no reality of fruit acceptable to God. Their language may be timid and doubtful as to their own relation to God, presumptuous in setting one scripture against another, and in no way either submissive to God's word or enjoying fellowship with Himself in the grace it reveals. If we profit not by His grace, what remains but His judgment?

HIS SIGHT OF JESUS ON HIGH, AND THE FURY OF THE JEWS

Acts 7: 54-56.

Intense exasperation followed Stephen's appeal; and the words he added redoubled their fury to madness and murder.

"And as they heard these things, they were cut to the heart and gnashed their teeth upon him. But, being full of the Holy Spirit, he looked stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, Lo, I behold the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God."

Impossible to conceive a more solemn issue on the testimony of Stephen, or a more awful proof of the Jews' hatred of the truth in direct antagonism to the Holy Spirit. His sketch of their history was indisputably true. Their recent behaviour and their present truculence were due to the same inheritance of alienation from God and His word which had already entailed woe upon woe. And darker clouds would gather round them, and still darker await them in the consummation of the age; when at length another godly remnant shall be raised up by grace, not to form part of the church as now, but to be the nucleus of the generation to come. Of these Micah 5: 3 speaks as the residue of His brethren, when the Ruler in Israel is about to stand and feed in the strength of Jehovah, in the majesty of the name of Jehovah His God. And they shall abide (or trust), with the unbelieving mass devoted to destruction; "for now shall He be great even to the ends of the earth," instead of being hid in God as now, the Head of the church, and they, instead of being merged in the church, "shall return unto the children of Israel:" the work which divine mercy and power will accomplish in that day.

But Stephen, like ourselves, had to withstand in the evil day, while the Lord is rejected on earth and crowned with glory in heaven. He was one of those whom the Lord before His prophecy on Mount Olivet had prepared His adversaries to expect. "Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets and wise

men and scribes; and of them ye will kill and crucify, and of them ye will scourge in your synagogues, and will persecute from city to city; so that all the righteous blood shed upon the earth should come upon you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things, shall come upon this generation." Stephen's words penetrated their hearts, and their visage betrayed their murderous intent without even the sham trial they gave His Master. No defiance met their fierce gaze. But being full of the Holy Spirit he looked steadfastly into heaven, where grace gave him to see God's glory. It was a miraculous vision without doubt, admirably fitted to comfort the spirit of the faithful servant, who was as full of compassion for his brethren after the flesh as of zeal for the Lord. But how pointed the contrast! they always resisting the Holy Spirit; he full of the Holy Spirit.

He was given to see another sight still nearer to his heart, "Jesus standing at God's right hand." This opened his lips to confess His name in the most direct terms, and in the concentrated power of all he had testified. "Lo, I behold the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at God's right hand."

There had been a transitional testimony up to this. The Messiah was rejected on earth, and the Jews were the most extreme in urging the deepest shame and ignominy for Him who was born King of the Jews. Thus they in their blindness fulfilled the scriptures that so it must be, if even privileged man be as wicked as God is good. But, as Peter preached, God raised Him up and made the very Jesus whom His people: crucified both Lord and Christ. No apostle exceeded this till now. In Acts 3: 13 and Acts 4: 27 it is still the Messianic title of "servant" (not "Son"). Stephen, on the utter refusal of Israel to bow his stiff neck, testifies to His being "the Son of man:" an enlarged and judicial title of His glory, well known even, in the O.T. in the Psalms and Prophets, as the Lord had pointed out its force from the time that rejection began decidedly. So that Stephen was quite in keeping with the truth; for the Jew stood in dead opposition to the glorified Messiah, no less than to the Messiah in humiliation. Jesus was still standing at God's right hand. But the Judge was at the door. So he saw Him on high and proclaimed Him as the Son of man, who will surely come in the clouds of heaven, judging Israel and all the nations.

Nor should we overlook that, as he said, "Lo, I behold the heavens opened." To him it was a literal sight, as none should doubt who believe in God's power and grace. It is recorded for our comfort in faith. For it is meant to be as real in its spiritual significance to the Christian, as it was in every way to him who saw and bore witness. As for us the veil is ever rent, so the heavens are always open. Jesus is there, the Son of God, sent that we might live through Him, and that He might die for us as propitiation for our sins. He is there now for us, man entered into the glory of God, and Saviour of all who believe, the fore-runner for such there. And the heavens which were opened on Him, heaven's object, are open for us, that we may be at home in spirit there, before He comes to fetch us. Here we are unknown; our citizenship is there where He is. It is our joy and privilege to be heavenly, and not of the world as He is not. We are already delivered by His grace from that judgment which the Name imports for Israel and the nations; for we belong to Him, no longer to them. We say it, not of pride but of faith, being not even our own but bought with a price, and what a price! And shall we not seek to walk consistently with it, and to exhort our brethren equally brought to own it

THE CHRISTIAN'S DEATH UNDER MAN'S HATRED

Acts 7: 57-60

None so recklessly cruel as those who have the highest religious prestige, and reject the

testimony of God which is their guilt and His rejection of their claims. So it was then in the great council of Jerusalem. They like their ancestors always resisted the Holy Spirit; Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit," not only rebuked their present state (however decent in appearance) as worse than all the past, but testified such grace and glory in Jesus on high as never had been announced by God before. With eyes fixed on heaven he saw by the Spirit's power not only God's glory but Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said (as already given) "Lo, I behold the Son of man standing at God's right hand."

This drove them to mad fury. "And they cried out with a loud voice, and held their ears and rushed upon him with one accord; and having cast [him] out of the city they stoned [him]. And the witnesses laid aside their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul. And they stoned Stephen praying and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit. And kneeling down he cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge; and having said this, he fell asleep" (vers. 57-60).

It is to be noted that Stephen spoke of the Lord as "the Son of man." So the Lord spoke of Himself, as the rejection of His Messianic dignity came out more and more. If the Jews refused Him as Jehovah's anointed Son of David, He, bowing to the deep humiliation, comes as the Son of man to seek and to save that which is lost. But He as such shall be seen sitting on the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. Stephen told them that he beheld the Son of man standing at God's right hand. It was an important step forward in promulgating the truth. Peter presented the heavens receiving the exalted Messiah until times of restoration of all, things of which God spoke by mouth of His holy prophets since time began; and he therefore urged on the men of Israel to repent and be converted for the blotting out of their sins, so that seasons of refreshment should come from Jehovah's presence, and Jesus be sent to bring them in. And this awaits Israel's conversion. Meanwhile the heavens are opened for the believer on earth; though he be not given to behold it like Stephen, it is no less his portion by faith. And the Lord Jesus receives our spirits above on death as surely as He did Stephen's.

Circumstances may differ; but, the inspired record of Stephen's death, is ours now to appropriate fully. We, too are exhorted to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5: 18); and it, is our shortcoming and shame not to be so. We too are entitled to fix our eyes on heaven, and we lose much, if we do not. There is no veil to hinder us now more than then. For the Christian, for the church, the veil is forever rent, and the heavens opened. As is the heavenly One, so are also the heavenly ones. It is the Christians' part with Christ before they are translated there at Christ's coming again; when, we shall bear the image of the heavenly One, as we have borne and still bear the image of the dusty man Adam. The Lord could say, Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit; and we with Stephen can say, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

No doubt timid unbelief of the gospel (which alas! often accompanies faith in Christ's person) may follow the ancient corruption of the truth, and dream of an intermediate chamber of dimness at the least till the dawn of our resurrection. But this is utterly false and anti-scriptural. Paradise is no prison nor dark abode. The paradise of God is not merely in heaven; but as man's paradise in Eden was the choicest spot for unfallen Adam, so God's paradise is the choicest domain above. There Jesus went after He accomplished redemption and glorified God even as to sin — the hardest task He ever undertook. Thither too the crucified but believing robber followed Him that very day, the unimpeachable witness that His blood cleanses from every sin. Therein all that overcome shall be in the day of glory, and eat of the tree of life when there is no tree of responsibility more to test, or threaten death (Rev. 2: 7). Stephen bears a direct and full witness to the Christian, not of the future change for the body, but of departure to be with Christ, which, as says the apostle Paul, is "very much better" than

remaining as we are, absent from the Lord.

Whilst this was the first thought of Stephen's heart, how precious the grace that shone next in his kneeling and crying "with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" He does not say now as the Lord did before He died, "for they know not what they do." The Twelve, he himself, to speak of chiefs only, had laid that sin fully on their conscience. It was the practical grace of a Christian, doing well, suffering for it, and taking it patiently with earnest intercession that the evil-doing Jews might be forgiven. O what a contrast with the Latin and Greek cursing communities, as well as with the poor Jews themselves!

As Christians we confess and would fain follow the Blesser. So He consecrated His last charge, His last act and attitude as He ascended to heaven. "And he led them out as far as Bethany, and having lifted up his hands, he blessed them. And it came to pass as he was blessing them, he was separated from them, and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24: 50, 51).