

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 6:9-7:60 - The first Christian martyr - Stephen

Today we are going to look at the account of the martyrdom of Stephen as recorded in Acts chapters 6 and 7.

Behind all the attacks and difficulties, which confronted the early church in Jerusalem lay the great adversary, Satan himself. He it was that stirred up the Sadducees to violence and their attempts to intimidate the apostles. Having failed to stem the advancing flow of the gospel by these means, he then tried to bring evil corruption into the company of Christians. Firstly, he put into the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit. Through Peter, this was very quickly judged. Secondly, he moved more subtly by bringing in contention amongst the Church, over what we may think a very small matter.

These were both to do with money. The first the collection of it and the second the doling of it out. As the number of the believers increased, the Grecians complained because their widows were getting less than the Hebrew widows. These Grecians were not Gentiles but Greek speaking Jews. The apostles, realising that Satan was behind this, acted wisely and quickly in appointing seven men to over look this business. Acts 6:3 says "Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." We gather from their names that they were all Grecians, so there would be no partiality. The apostles laid their hands upon them. "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." So once again the attempts of Satan were thwarted. Moreover one of the seven chosen, Stephen, became a special vessel of the grace and power of the Spirit of God. The rest of chapter 6 of Acts and the whole of chapter 7 is devoted to what God wrought through him, until the time of his martyrdom.

This power in Stephen was so marked that it stirred up opposition to the Gospel in fresh quarters. "Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen." These were all Grecians as was Stephen, but with all their knowledge and skill with words, "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spake." As they could not resist him, they had to resort to the usual device of making false accusations using lying witnesses. "And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council. And set up false witnesses, which said, this man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us." There was a measure of truth in what they said but they were more concerned with Moses than they were of God, and more concerned about the temple than the law.

In this way the controversy between the nation and God was carried further. They, in fact, challenged God by what they said. God took up this challenge and raised up Stephen, so filled by the Holy Spirit that even the fashion of his face was altered. They likened it to the face of an angel, which it certainly was not. They had never seen an angel anyway. It was the face of a man full of the Spirit of God, and reflecting the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

In answer to the high priest's question in 7:1, "Are these things so?", Stephen begins a remarkable account of the nation of Israel's resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit through leaders, kings, and prophets in keeping them faithful to the God who had called Abraham their father out of Mesopotamia. They were about to commit the final act of resisting the Holy Spirit, which would cancel forever the blessing of God upon the nation on the basis of keeping the law. In the days of Samuel they asked for a king. In 1 Samuel 8:6 and 7 we read, "But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should reign over them." So they rejected God. When the Son of God came into the world, their true Messiah and King, they said, "We will not have this man to reign over us" and in answer to Pilate's question, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let Him be crucified." So they rejected the Son of God. Now at the end of Stephen's address he says, "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." In killing Stephen, they were rejecting the last testimony of the Holy Spirit. So the whole of the Trinity had been rejected by the nation.

At the beginning of his address, Stephen goes right back to the commencement of their history as a nation. It was a new departure in God's ways with the earth. "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham." No nation could have had a more glorious beginning. Stephen then goes through the history of six men who had been instrumental in bringing in the mind of God for His people. All of these men in varying degrees had been rejected, although Stephen only goes into detail with three of them. Finally he speaks of the Lord Jesus, the seventh, whom they had just murdered.

After Abraham, he speaks of Joseph. He was rejected and sold by his brethren who were "moved with envy." Matthew records the efforts of Pilate to deliver Jesus, "for he knew that for envy they had delivered Him." So it was with Moses; the saying at which he fled was from one of his own brethren, and not by an Egyptian, "Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?" The rejection came from amongst his own people, and not from outside. So it was with the Lord Jesus.

Despite this, Moses was used of God to deliver His people out of Egypt in a wonderful way. Having defeated all their enemies and brought them into the wilderness, He gave them the law. Then Moses raised up the tabernacle so that they might serve God, yet still they turned away from God and Moses to the very worst kind of idolatry. Not only in the wilderness, but also in the Promised Land, they were slack about God's sacrifices and tampered with idols, so that eventually God had to carry them away to Babylon. Yet still God had raised up David and then Solomon who built the temple. But even this they boasted of as though it guaranteed God's presence among them. But Jeremiah had to say to them in 7:3-4 "Thus saith the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.'" They failed to realise that God dwelt in the Heaven of the heavens, far above the most gorgeous buildings on earth.

Stephen's closing words in verses 51 to 53 are an awful indictment against the nation, culminating in their betrayal and murder of the Just One. "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it." Their standing before God was on the basis of the law but they had not kept it, and they had murdered their Messiah. These are the two great counts in his indictment of the Jews. Stephen changed from his historical account of their unfaithfulness, to God's accusation against them, and this added great force to his words. "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and gnashed on him with their teeth."

The final moments of Stephen's life are very moving and wonderful. They show us the effect on a man when he is filled with the Holy Spirit and whose whole being is taken up with heaven. When we think of this scene we often refer to that verse in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." At the end of his life Stephen, displays the character of the Lord Jesus and spoke and acted as He did. Let us read and consider the practical lessons we can learn from him in verses 55 and 56. "But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God."

The Holy Spirit, if ungrieved, will always direct our attention to heaven, because that is where the Lord Jesus is. As the glorified Man, He should be the object of our lives, and as beholding His glory we shall be transformed into His image. The word 'changed' in 2 Corinthians 3:18, is really transformed. This word in Greek is where our word 'metamorphosis' comes from. It is only used three times in the Scriptures. If we link them together we shall see what the Holy Spirit would teach us by using this word. In Matthew 17:2 it is used of the Lord Jesus, "And was transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun, and His raiment was white as the light." For a brief moment, what the Lord Jesus was inwardly shone out and His appearance was changed. In Romans 12, Paul uses it to describe the change that should take place in a believer when he yields himself to God. "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." The third mention is in the verses we are reading in Acts. I think we can see that when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, what we are as having been born of God, will be seen practically by those around us.

Every word that Stephen said was exactly right. When looking up into heaven, he saw the glory of God and Jesus, but when he bears witness of this to the crowd about him, he alters it. He says, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." The change is important. The Lord Jesus when standing accused before the high priest said, "Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power." The title 'Son of man' is used by the Lord Jesus of Himself as being rejected of His own people as their Messiah. The Jews around Stephen would remember these words and would know their meaning. But how sweet it must have been to the heart of Stephen as looking up into heaven, he saw his Lord and Saviour, Jesus, standing, as it were, waiting to receive his soul. Even in the darkest moments of our lives, the Holy Spirit will make the presence of Jesus very real. How willing

then was Stephen to lay down his life for Christ. He proved what was the acceptable and perfect will of God, and gladly bowed to it.

And so we further read in verses 57 and 58, "Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul." By stopping their ears they, refused to hear the testimony of the Holy Spirit. In casting Stephen out of their city, they did exactly to him what they had done to his Master. The Lord Jesus was led forth out from Jerusalem and crucified outside the gate. Finally, in killing him, they rejected Stephen's testimony to a risen and glorified Lord. There was no further hope for Israel. But how wonderful are the ways of God in grace, for it is just here that we have the very first mention in Scripture of Saul of Tarsus. If Israel was rejecting all God's offers of blessing, He would, on the basis of the death of the Lord Jesus open the way of blessing and salvation to the Gentiles. And here was the man who was going to do it.

How typical of God is this! Just as, after the crucifixion, the disciples were commissioned to go forth and preach the Gospel, but beginning at Jerusalem. The very city in which God's beloved Son had been murdered was the place where the Gospel of the grace of God was to begin.

But the closing moments of Stephen's life are very beautiful. Turning again to 2 Corinthians, we read in 4:11, "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." How true this verse was of Stephen! He at his death manifested the life of Jesus. How it must have delighted the heart of God, so soon after the death of His own Son, to see one who dearly loved the Lord Jesus, giving his life willingly as a martyr and manifesting that same submission to God's will, seeking forgiveness to those who were killing him as they did God's beloved Son.

The last recorded words of the Lord Jesus were addressed to His Father. In Luke 23:46, He says "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Likewise the last words of Stephen were to his Lord. We read in Acts 7:59, "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." There we see faith that at such a moment can trust the hand of the Saviour. All was over as far as this life was concerned; Stephen was happy to leave everything for the future in the hands of Jesus. "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

The Lord Jesus is unique in that only He could dismiss His spirit and lay down His life. But Stephen comes very near to it. 'He kneeled down'; the stones did not knock him down, as we would have thought, but he kneeled down in submission to the will of God. Of the Lord Jesus we read that, "He bowed His head." Stephen cried with a loud voice. Though he was dying, it was a voice of triumph. The work of the Lord Jesus on the cross was completed and so He cried with a loud voice, "It is finished." Stephen's work, though short, was done. But oh! Think of his last words, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." There was no hatred in the heart of Stephen but love for his enemies. Stephen was in perfect accord with his Lord who said, "Father, forgive them." Stephen seals his testimony with his life, for just at that moment we read, "And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

The prayer of the Lord Jesus on the cross for His murderers was answered by the sending forth of the Gospel, beginning at Jerusalem. The prayer of Stephen was answered in the conversion of Saul. I am quite sure that Saul never forgot the stoning of Stephen in which he had a part. He refers to it in Acts 22:20, "And when the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death." God's ways are beyond our understanding. Who but He can turn tragedy into triumph, an act of hatred into the way of love? May we know something of this grace in our lives today?

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