

## STEPHEN'S DEFENCE AND EXECUTION

– ACTS 7:54-8:2 – MARCH 2. –

**Pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you."**

– Matt. 5:44.

STEPHEN'S defence before the Sanhedrin Court turned out to be a defence of the truth, rather than of himself. Full of zeal for the Lord and for a proper use of his privileges as a minister of the truth, Stephen was courageous – seemingly to the extent of ignoring all thought of personal safety. His defence is not part of this lesson, but it is, nevertheless, worthy of consideration. It displays a clear insight into the past history of his people, and a clear appreciation of the lessons inculcated through their experiences. In a word, it gives evidence that Stephen was a Bible student – "a workman who needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Stephen in all this was a worthy example to the Lord's flock, the lesson still being appropriate. With us also the first thought should be the privilege of serving the truth, and if the will of God be such, the privilege of laying down life, even, in its service. A full consecration to the Lord on our part, and a keen appreciation of the truths of the Scripture, will ultimately make us courageous – not careful for the present life when weighed in the balances with the interests of the Lord's cause. But now, as in Stephen's day, such courage can only come from a knowledge of the divine plan, and the knowledge can only come through a right dividing of the word of truth; – and such abilities imply a devotion of time and energy to the study of truth, and the guidance of the holy spirit in the understanding of it.

The charge against Stephen was blasphemy against the holy place, Jerusalem (and especially its holy Temple, which sanctified it), and against the law of Moses. Passing by the charges, Stephen went into a history of the Lord's leading of Israel from the time of Abraham down to his own time; and thus showed his full faith in the holy places and

in the promises and presence of God, which made them holy. His familiarity with the facts, and the reverent manner in which he stated them, and the conclusions which he drew from them, must have shown his judges clearly that so far from being a blasphemer of Moses and his institutions and holy things, he was a firm believer in these, and a zealous advocate of them. So with us: when discussing holy things there may at times be those who, intentionally or ignorantly, will attribute to us evil conditions or evil motives. With us, as with Stephen, the best manner of dealing with such charges is to show, without ostentation, and by deeply reverent manner, that we are trusting implicitly in the gracious promises of God, and that we appreciate fully his various providential leadings and dealings in the past, not only as respects ourselves, but with all his holy people. Now, as in Stephen's case, the best answer respecting our fidelity to the holy things is represented in our knowledge of them, and in the reverent manner in which we mention them.

Stephen rehearsed to his hearers the fact that Moses, the great Law-giver, whom they now revered, had at one time been rejected by Israel, saying, "Who made thee a judge or a ruler over us?" But he was God's agent and representative, and hence, in due time, he became Israel's deliverer. He reminded them also that Moses had said, "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from among your brethren, like unto me." The lesson which Stephen desired his hearers to draw is, that as Moses was rejected at his first offering to the Israelites so the one like unto Moses would, like him, be rejected – had been rejected, in the person of Jesus. Nevertheless, as Moses subsequently became the leader and commander of the people, and delivered them, so also Jesus would in due time become the great deliverer of his people, – at his second advent. He pointed further to the fact that the prophets all down through the Jewish age had been refused by the people in the time of their presence and ministry with **[R2958 : page 57]** them, many of them being foully dealt with; but nevertheless subsequently they were discerned to have been the Lord's representatives. Stephen would have his hearers recognize

Christ as the great prophet, whom God had set forth to be the instructor of the people. We see no attempt to defend himself, except by showing up the truth. He evidently relied upon his course of conduct and teaching corroborating the history which he was now delineating. Let us also, in our intercourse with others whom we would lead into the truth, pay less attention to self-defence than to a presentation of the divine Word. As the Apostle declares, the sword of the spirit, the Word of God, is sharper than any two-edged sword. – Heb. 4:12.

About this time, apparently, some manifestation of impatience on the part of the Court caused Stephen to hasten to his conclusions abruptly, saying, "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the holy spirit; as your fathers did so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted, and they have slain them which showed before the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers; who have received the law by the dispensation of angels, and have not kept it." (Vss. 51-53.) It is not necessary to suppose that these simple, true words were uttered in any harsh tone or strifeful manner; for everything about Stephen's attitude seems to imply gentleness, forbearance, love. It was the truth, and it was the right time to tell it. He evidently knew what was likely to be the result anyway, and wished to give his testimony, that as those who had foretold the just one had been killed it was no more remarkable that those who afterward bore witness to him should be killed also.

His persecutors were thwarted; their attempt to traduce him and show him an enemy of the Lord, of the nation, and of the law, had abundantly failed. He stood before the Sanhedrin a great teacher, reproving them, and showing from their own Scriptural records that they were now intent on doing toward him as their fathers had done toward the Lord's faithful in every age. His hearers were "cut to the heart." This expression reminds us of the record (Acts 2:37) of those who heard Peter preach on the same theme – they were "pricked to the heart." But people can be pricked to the heart, and yet have very

different results follow. Much will depend upon what is in the heart when it is pricked. If it be good the results will be good; if it be evil the results will be evil. Out of the abundance of [R2958 : page 58] the heart the mouth speaks, and the course of action is guided. These men were in a wicked condition of heart, and the truths uttered by Stephen were to them stings, rebukes, arousing their hatred to a pitch of frenzy – "they gnashed on him with their teeth."

Undaunted by their manifestations of hatred and malice, Stephen was so filled with an appreciation of the Lord's goodness, and of his being a servant of the truth, that he was all aglow with interest in his theme, and his face illuminated with an angelic expression, such as the truth only can impart. It was then that looking away from his own surroundings – away from his enemies' faces – he was granted a glimpse of the Lord at the right hand of the Father. Whether it was a mental vision, such as any of us can awaken in our minds, such as the Apostle referred to when he said that we should be continually "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith," or whether it was actually a vision granted to Stephen at this particular time, we know not; – most probably it was a vision.

He of course did not see in reality what he described, as that would be an impossibility; – "No man hath seen God at any time," and the Only Begotten of the Father is now the express image of his person, and he also would be invisible to humanity; even the light of his glory would have smitten Stephen down, as it smote Saul of Tarsus a short time afterward. But that Stephen should have had a vision or revelation of his Master and his high exaltation is entirely reasonable; he told what he saw, and this furnished the occasion of his death. His adversaries could have found nothing against him in anything he had said, or that any witness could have proved, but now, affecting great indignation at the thought that Jesus, whom they had crucified, Jesus the imposter, had become exalted to heavenly glory, next to Jehovah himself – this furnished an opportunity for the claim that Stephen was a blasphemer, and therefore ought to be stoned to death. All being in a wrong attitude

of heart, the same impulse affected all, and they rushed upon the faithful servant of the truth, pushing him out of the city to a secluded spot, where they stoned him to death. Let us likewise be faithful to the Lord, and we also shall have revelations of our Lord's glory – not, probably, visions or dreams, but such mental pictures as are clearly delineated before us in God's Word, which now is commonly in the hands of his people; and under the leadings of the holy spirit reveals to us the deep things of God which human eyes have not seen nor ears heard. – I Cor. 2:10,13.

The stoning of Stephen would seem to have been a violation of the Roman law. The Mosaic law, indeed, commanded stoning as a penalty for blasphemy; but from the time the Romans took possession of the country they seem to have decreed that life could not be taken in any legal form except that of the Roman law; but Stephen's enemies were so enraged that they were evidently willing to risk some personal injury rather than be defeated in their purpose of destroying their enemy, whom they could not match with Scripture or logic.

The Lord's servants to day are in no particular danger of being stoned to death after the same manner; but the majority of them have had experiences, nevertheless, which in many respects correspond. False representations, anger, malice, hatred, strife, etc., hurled against the Lord's people, are often hard to bear; and yet all those who receive such figurative stoning in the same manner that Stephen received his literal stoning, are sure to be greatly blessed. They find that although such experiences are severe as respects the flesh, they are nevertheless helpful, profitable, as respects the new nature. They thus demonstrate the truth of the Apostle's statement, "The outward man perisheth, but the inward man is renewed day by day," – by just such experiences rightly received.

It is here that attention is drawn to the fact that Saul of Tarsus was probably a member of the Sanhedrin, which tried Stephen, and surely one of those who consented to his death; – standing guard over the

outer garments of those who executed the will of the Sanhedrin, in doing the actual stoning. He refers to the matter himself subsequently, in contrite language. (Acts 22:20.) Let us have hope, therefore, that some of those who today assault us, because of loyalty to the Lord and his Word, may yet be amongst those who will penitently acknowledge the error of their ways. Indeed, a number of instances of this kind have occurred; a number of those who are now deeply interested in present truth at one time were so bitterly opposed that they burned the publications which represent these truths, and gloried in the deed. It shows us, too, how God looks at the heart, and teaches us that some who are not bad at heart may at times be so blinded by prejudice that light appears darkness to them and darkness light.

Stephen's attitude in receiving his persecution was most noble. He prayed for himself and for his enemies – that the latter might be forgiven, so far as he was concerned; – they will have enough to answer for and to receive "stripes" or just retribution. For himself, that the Lord would receive his spirit. There has been some query as to what would be implied in this expression, "Receive my spirit." We have already shown\* that the primary sense of the word spirit is energy or "life," and that the spirit, energy or life, of all flesh was forfeited through sin; but that believers, recognizing the fact that Christ has died for our sins, recognizing the fact also that whosoever accepts Christ, as his Redeemer, receives through him a new right to life – that to such the spirit of life is no longer reckoned as forfeited, but reckoned as being restored to them again, – and that unto eternal life, if they are faithful. Not that Christians are privileged to retain their hold upon the spirit of life now, and thus avoid dying, but that God has promised us, through his Word, that he who has the Son has life – has received back again by faith through him a future right to life, to be fully attained through a resurrection. Nevertheless, it is explained to us that "our life is hid with Christ in God," and will not be ours until "he who is our life shall appear" at his Second advent, – and grant, according to the Father's plan, new or resurrection bodies to his people. (Col. 3:3,4.) Stephen meant to express to the Lord his confidence, his trust, in a future life

through a resurrection, when he made this expression, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" – receive my life, preserve my life, that it may be granted to me again in the resurrection, according [R2958 : page 59] to thy gracious promise: I commit my all to thee, in hope.

[\\*MILLENNIAL DAWN, Vol. V., Chap. 13.](#)

Stephen's attitude under persecution may well commend itself to us: our love for the Lord and our benevolent sympathy with all the gracious features of his plan should lift us above any and everything like vindictiveness or spitefulness against our enemies; and should permit us to see that their mistreatment of us, is largely because they are blind to the truth. They know not us, even as they knew not the Lord; and, as he said, if they called the Master of the house Beelzebub, and said all manner of evil against him falsely, we must not be surprised if the same should be our lot. We know, therefore, to count it all joy when we fall into such matters; and should rejoice that we are counted worthy of a share with the Lord in the trials and difficulties of this present time, that in due time we [R2959 : page 59] may be made partakers also of the glory to follow. With us also the one thought should be the pleasing of our Lord and the attainment, through him, of the life everlasting – having him to care for our spirit of life, and to revive us again in the resurrection in due time.

### **"HE FELL ASLEEP."**

In the midst of his prayer he fell asleep – he died. Commenting on these words an "orthodox" writer says: "Tho the pagan authors sometimes used sleep to signify death, it was only a poetic figure. When Christ, on the other hand, said, 'Our friend, Lazarus, sleepeth,' he used the word, not as a figure but as an expression of a fact. In that mystery of death in which the pagan saw only nothingness, Jesus saw continued life, rest, waking – the elements which enter into sleep. And thus in Christian speech and thought, as the doctrine of the resurrection struck its roots deeper, the word 'dead,' with its hopeless finality, gave place to the more gracious and hopeful word, 'sleep.' The pagans'

burying place carried in its name no suggestion of hope or comfort. It was a burying place, a hiding place, monumentum, a mere memorial of something gone; ...but the Christian thought of death as sleep brought with it, in the Christian speech, the kindred thought of a chamber of rest, and embodied it in the word cemetery – the place to lie down to sleep" – Word Studies.

Throughout the Scriptures the word "sleep" is frequently used as a synonym for death – but only in view of the hoped-for awakening – the resurrection. It was because Abraham and his posterity believed God that he was able to raise them up from the dead, and that his agreement so to do was implied in the promise that all the families of the earth should be blessed, that it was impossible for them to think of their departed ones as being totally *extinct* in death; – from that time onward sleep, as a synonym of death, became common amongst those who waited for the consolation of Israel. And in New Testament times, in harmony with our Lord's declaration, "The maid is not dead, but sleepeth," and again, "Lazarus sleepeth," etc., we have the term sleep commonly used amongst the followers of Jesus in the various New Testament writings. (See Matt. 9:24; John 11:11.) Many, however, who use the term sleep, and who place it upon the tombstones in their cemeteries, overlook entirely the fact that it implies that the sleeping one is unconscious, that he will not be conscious until the waking time, the resurrection. The figure is a beautiful one, viewed from the right standpoint, the standpoint of divine revelation, which shows us the blessings of mankind, restitution, which are to be expected as soon as the morning of the new Millennial day shall have been fully ushered in.

Doubtless there were many who considered the martyrdom of Stephen a great calamity to the Church, a great loss of influence; a cutting off of one of the ablest exponents of the gospel. But we are not sure that they took a correct view. Viewed from God's standpoint, quite possibly the testimony which Stephen gave at the close of his life was a most beneficial one; first in its influence upon the believers, in



teaching them by precept and example faithfulness, even unto death; and that the Lord's people could die as they lived, – joyful through the faith that is in Christ. His death also probably bore a valuable witness to some of his enemies. Quite possibly the Apostle Paul's first favorable impressions toward Christianity were received through his witness of the courage and zeal of this noble martyr, – whose spirit of Christ he doubtless witnessed in others of the hated "sect, everywhere spoken against."

So with us; we know not which act in life may glorify the Lord most, or whether our living or dying would be most helpful to his cause. We are to leave this in the Lord's hands, and to remember that our course in any event must be one of faithfulness, and that if faithful nothing can by any means harm us, but all things must work together for our good.

