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THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

– MARCH 5. – ACTS 6:9 – 8:3. –

FAITHFUL ST. STEPHEN – HIS ELOQUENCE AND ZEAL FOR GOD AND TRUTH STIRRED HIS ENEMIES – THEY HATED HIM FOR THE QUALITIES THEY SHOULD HAVE ADMIRERD – BECAUSE BLINDED BY ERROR – HIS FIRST BATTLE IN THE SYNAGOGUE – HIS SECOND BATTLE BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN – HIS VICTORY IN DEATH.

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." – Revelation 2:10.

STRICTLY speaking, our Lord Jesus was the first Christian martyr; but the first of His followers to endure death because of loyalty in preaching the Gospel of Jesus was St. Stephen, one of the seven elected Deacons, appointed to the distribution of the Church's charities. The Apostles had sought to give themselves entirely to the Master's work, and doubtless expected little of special service from the Deacons appointed. Nevertheless, by God's providence one of these, Stephen, because of his love and zeal was given much of the Lord's grace and blessing and permitted to lay down his life faithfully for the Truth.

Seemingly St. Stephen was a man of great power and [R5858 : page 59] a lover of the Truth. His choice as one of these special Deacons indicates that those who knew him best highly estimated his purity of character and life. His eloquence in defense of the Master and His Gospel is well evidenced by this lesson.

History says that at that time there were four hundred and sixty synagogues in Jerusalem. Some of these were Hebraic; that is, those attending worship there were accustomed to the Hebrew tongue, and it was used in these. Others of the synagogues were called Hellenist;

that is to say, Greek. The Greek was the cultured language of that time in the outside world; and some Jews and proselytes living in outside places and in Jerusalem preferred to have the books of the Law and the Prophets in the Greek language.

It is supposed that St. Stephen had been attached to one of these synagogues, and that this fact accounted for his going thither to urge upon his associates the message that Jesus was the Messiah. It has been assumed, with apparently good reason, that Saul of Tarsus attended the same synagogue; and that he was one of the disputants over whom St. Stephen, by the Lord's grace, seemed to have an advantage in these debates. Thus a bitter feeling was aroused.

It seemed to the Jewish rulers that this message respecting Jesus as the Messiah and a Jewish responsibility for His death, and respecting God's favor in raising Him from the dead, was a gross error which, being set before the people in masterly fashion, was likely to arouse a spirit of resentment against the rulers of the Jews and to be subversive of all law and government in Palestine. Indeed, these Christians claimed that because of this rejection of Jesus the Jewish nation had been rejected from God's favor, and that dire calamities were coming. Those committed to the old order of things refused to believe these prophecies of coming disaster.

St. Stephen's second battle was the one which preceded his death. The Sanhedrin, angry against him, suborned witnesses; that is to say, they bribed certain men to make complaint, charging St. Stephen with having blasphemed – with having declared Moses and the Law obsolete, with declaring that the Temple was no longer God's Temple. These witnesses put together certain isolated sayings of St. Stephen, which thus patched up, made the Truth to appear false and blasphemous. So it is with any matter. The form in which a statement is made has much to do with the impression which it makes. St. Stephen had said the very things that they charged; but

by putting his statements together as they did, they misrepresented the essence of his teaching.

ST. STEPHEN'S DEFENSE

After these paid witnesses had given their testimony before the Sanhedrin, charging blasphemy – the penalty for which was death by stoning – the Sanhedrin, with a show of fairness, permitted St. Stephen to reply in his own defense. This he did in a masterly way, by taking up the thread of Jewish history and reciting it, showing his implicit faith in God's dealings with Abraham and in the promises there made. In orderly manner he brought the thought of his hearers down to the time of Moses and the giving of the Law, and reminded them that Moses had said that in due time God would raise up a greater Prophet than he. (Deuteronomy 18:18,19.) This great Prophet, St. Stephen allowed them to infer, was Jesus; and since Moses had particularly referred to Jesus thus as greater, it could be no disloyalty to Moses now to accept that greater Prophet. Thus one feature of the charge against St. Stephen was overthrown. He was not disloyal to Moses, but contrariwise.

As for the Temple, St. Stephen reminded his hearers that God first established the Tabernacle in the wilderness; and that by and by, in its stead, God provided the Temple at Jerusalem. It was no disrespect to the Tabernacle for them to believe in the Temple that Solomon built. God had now provided that a still higher Temple should take the place of the building made with hands. The higher Temple was the spiritual one, to be composed of the people of God who, as living stones, would be builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit. As it was not blasphemy to accept the Temple of Solomon instead of the Tabernacle of Moses, neither should it be considered blasphemous to accept this higher, spiritual Temple, of which Jesus is the Head, or Foundation, instead of the typical Temple, built of wood and stone.

VICTORY IN DEATH!

So able, so logical, so convincing, were the words of St. Stephen that his hearers "were cut to the heart," not in a penitent sense, but with a realization that their cause was coming out second best. It is assumed that Saul of Tarsus was a member of that Sanhedrin. They no longer had any hope of justly charging St. Stephen with blasphemy. Their only hope now was that they could fasten upon something that he would say as being blasphemous, and on the spot rush him to his death.

The moment came. St. Stephen, full of his subject, preaching Christ and the blessings yet to come through Him upon Israel and the world, was radiant in face – like an angel of the Lord. And looking up toward Heaven he exclaimed, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God!" This was the signal for the Sanhedrin to raise a cry of blasphemy and rush upon God's messenger.

Just what he did mean by those words, we may not too surely say. Remembering that our best sight is with the eyes of our understanding, we might use the same words – not referring to anything seen by our natural sight, but merely to our mental view and our positiveness of its truth. Thus a blind man, catching the point of an argument, might truthfully say, "Oh, yes, I see now!" **[R5858 : page 60]**

We may be sure that a mob was ready to follow the suggestion of the Sanhedrin. Mobs now, as then, seem ready for any kind of violence if they have a leader and a pretext, especially if the pretext and the leadership be along religious lines and from those recognized as authorities. There is in the fallen nature a ferocious, bestial disposition which seems blood-thirsty and only awaiting opportunity.

Pushing the minister of Jesus outside of their gates – for no execution was allowed on the inside – the crowd threw their clothing at the feet of the young man Saul of Tarsus. Thus he became their authority for the stoning. Then they stoned Stephen to death, he crying at the time, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" – my life – and also, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!" This was St. Stephen's climax of victory – faithfulness unto death, and, withal, the loving spirit in which he received death through his enemies – the spirit of the Master, the same spirit which we should cultivate and manifest.

HEROISM IN THE TRENCHES

St. Stephen has set us an example. Indeed, examples are not difficult to find, showing what manner of persons we ought to be. The difficulty seems to be that none but those of fervent spirit and well instructed of the Lord profit by the examples. For instance, the world is today giving the Church a wonderful lesson in respect to faithfulness unto death. When the followers of Jesus look across the water and behold millions of men leaving home, family, business, pleasure and every consideration to obey the rulers of their lands – to go into the trenches and suffer the hardships and exposure and wounds and death, it seems truly marvelous.

We say to ourselves, "What manner of persons ought we Christians to be!" We have not been called to kill our fellowmen, but to do them good. We have not been called for a few cents per day of wage or possibly an iron cross or a name on some roll of honor, but have been promised glory, honor, immortality, joint-heirship with our Lord in His Kingdom. Moreover, ours is not only the privilege of helping men now instead of destroying them, but the blessed privilege also of helping them in the coming Age, from imperfections up to the image and likeness of God. Oh, what manner of persons ought we Christians to be! How faithful, how loyal!

Our Golden Text is impressive. Our enlistment is not for a few days, but undertaken with a full understanding that in order to gain

the great prize we must lay down our lives in the Lord's service – faithfully, loyally. How many Christians have rightly understood what was signified by consecration of their heart to the Lord and by taking up their cross to be His followers through evil report or through good report? It is not too late yet to learn our lessons more thoroughly and to determine that by the grace of God we will be faithful unto death to Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

