

"HATED BY MEN; ACKNOWLEDGED BY CHRIST"

In this passage, we come to the account of Stephen's martyrdom. Stephen was the first Christian martyr, the first follower of Christ to be put to death as a result of his witness to Christ. This is where we get our English word 'martyr' -- it is drawn from the Greek word for 'witness.' Last week, in our study of Stephen's speech before the Jewish council, we saw that his overview of Israel's history was focused on demonstrating two things: the fact that the temple was never intended to be a permanent aspect of biblical religion, and the fact that the people of Israel had a long history of rejecting those whom God sent to proclaim his deliverance. We also saw that Stephen ended his speech by saying that the Jewish leaders had done the same thing with Jesus. They had betrayed and killed the Righteous One, the Lord's Messiah. In the passage that we are studying tonight, Luke tells us how the council responded to Stephen's indictment. *This passage teaches us that though the world often hates, rejects, and persecutes those who are loyal to Christ, we can be certain that Jesus is always acting as our advocate in heaven.*

**Two Responses to Stephen's Testimony**

In the first part of our passage, we see two responses to Stephen's speech. The first response is that of the members of the council, who were enraged at Stephen for his boldness in saying such things to them. They even ground their teeth at him, as if they were wild animals. This may be an allusion to Psalm 22, where David foretells the sufferings of Christ by referring to his opponents as bulls, lions, and dogs. If so, then this is one of many places in this passage where Luke points out that Stephen's sufferings bore a striking resemblance to the sufferings of his Lord. He was sharing in Christ's sufferings.

It is important for us to remember that this is something that every Christian is called to do. Suffering for Christ is not just for martyrs. As Paul tells us in Romans 8, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him* in order that we may also be glorified with him." [vv. 16-17] Paul goes so far as to say that our heavenly inheritance is contingent upon our sharing in Christ's sufferings. This explains why, at several points in the book of Revelation, the entire church is represented by martyrs. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, "Every true Christian has the spirit of a martyr." [*Charity and Its Fruits*, 231]

The second response to Stephen's testimony stands in sharp contrast to the response of the council. While the council raged against Stephen, the Lord responded to his speech by granting him a prophetic vision. In this vision, heaven was opened so that Stephen could see Jesus standing as his advocate at the throne of God. In the words of New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God." [cited in Stott, 141] This is a fulfillment of what Jesus promised his followers when he said, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." [Mt. 10:32-33] Confessing Christ before men sometimes comes at a high price, as Stephen and other Christians have discovered. But in the last analysis, the cost of not confessing Christ before men is infinitely greater.

As Stephen describes his vision to the council, he draws upon two Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. The first is Daniel 7:13-14, where the prophet Daniel receives a vision in which he sees "one like a son of man" being given worldwide dominion as he ascends to God's throne in heaven. Stephen is saying that Jesus is this Son of Man figure who was foretold in Daniel's vision.

The second passage is Psalm 110:1, where David says this about the Messiah, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” The key difference between that verse and Stephen’s vision is that Stephen sees Jesus standing, not sitting, at God’s right hand. The reason for this change seems to be due to the fact that Jesus was assuring Stephen of his work as his heavenly advocate. Stephen was about to be condemned by a human court, but the Lord comforted him by showing him that Jesus was standing at the throne of God on his behalf. The same is true for all who trust in Christ alone for their salvation. As John assures us in his first letter, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” [1 Jn. 2:1]

In reporting the content of his vision to the council, Stephen was telling them that what Jesus had said when he was brought before them had in fact come to pass. We read about this in Mark 14:62, where the council asked Jesus if he was the Christ and he answered by saying, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” Jesus was saying that he is the Messiah who was prophesied in Daniel’s vision. He was saying that he has dominion over all the earth. It was a statement that enraged the council when Jesus first said it, and it provoked the same response when Stephen confirmed it.

### Two Aspects of Stephen's Stoning

This brings us to the second part of the passage: the account of Stephen's stoning. As in the first part of the passage, there is another contrast here, a contrast between Stephen and his opponents. On the one hand, the council is described as flying into a fit of rage, shouting and stopping up their ears so that they do not have to listen to this man any more. There is even a question over whether this was a legal execution or an example of mob violence, since the Jews were not permitted to exercise the death penalty without the approval of the Roman governor. Luke does tell us that they followed the requirement of the law in that the witnesses against Stephen were the first ones to cast the stones. Notice also that this is how Luke introduces Saul, better known by his Roman name of Paul, into his narrative. The witnesses laid their garments at Saul's feet as they prepared to cast their stones at Stephen.

While the council went wild with rage, Luke is careful to point out that Stephen remained perfectly calm. As commentator Dennis Johnson observes, "Stephen's demeanor shows us the calm hope and kindness that faith in Jesus imparts to those who rest in his grace." [*Let's Study Acts*, 91] It is also noteworthy that Stephen's final words are so similar to those of Jesus when he was being

crucified. Stephen says, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." This is almost identical to Jesus' dying cry, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" The main difference is that, while Jesus committed his spirit into the hands of God the Father, Stephen committed his into the hands of Jesus. The fact that Stephen would do this testifies to the high Christology of the early church. In other words, the doctrine that says that Jesus is fully divine was not something that gradually developed over time, as some try to argue. Rather, it was the earliest Christian confession. It is what they meant when they declared, "Jesus is Lord!"

Stephen's entrusting of his spirit into the hands of Jesus serves as a wonderful example for us to follow. We need to be entrusting our lives into the hands of Jesus each and every day of our lives. And then, when it is God's appointed time for us to leave this world, as Calvin tells us, "we must fly unto this prayer, that Christ will receive our spirit." This is put so well in the great hymn, "Abide with Me, Fast Falls the Eventide," where we sing

*I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless:*

*Ills have no weight, and tear no bitterness.*

*Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?*

*I triumph still if thou abide with me.*

The second thing that Stephen said as he was being put to death was this: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Like Jesus on the cross, Stephen prayed for those who were persecuting him. And take note of how God answered Stephen’s prayer. He answered it by pardoning Saul and making him the apostle to the Gentiles. Augustine even says that Saul would not have become a Christian were it not for Stephen’s prayer. That may be going a bit too far, but surely there was some connection between Stephen’s prayer and Saul’s conversion.

Before we move on to the final section, I should also say something about the way Stephen’s death is described. Luke uses a euphemism, saying that Stephen “fell asleep.” This does not mean, as some try to argue, that the souls of Christians go to sleep when they die. We know that this is not true because there are passages that describe the souls of deceased Christians as being fully conscious while they await the day of their bodily resurrection. The reason why the biblical writers sometimes use sleep as a euphemism for Christian death is because of their confidence that the Christian’s body will not remain in the earth forever. When Jesus returns, his cry of command will be like an alarm clock, and the bodies of all of his saints will be roused and raised to glory.

## **Two Results of Stephen's Martyrdom**

This brings us to the third part of our passage, where Luke describes what took place in the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom. And once again, there is a contrast. First, Luke tells us that a great persecution arose, led by none other than Saul himself. Saul was scandalized by the claim that God had raised from the dead a man who had died a death that so clearly showed that he was under the divine curse. Saul thought it was blasphemous for Stephen to say that a crucified man was standing at the right hand of God in heaven. This is why he was so zealous in his efforts to destroy the church. He was so intent on destroying the church that he dragged both men and women off to prison. He did not discriminate between the sexes.

Luke also tells us that this persecution resulted in the scattering of Christians throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. The apostles remained in Jerusalem, perhaps because they were Hebraic Jews rather than Hellenistic ones like Stephen. It may be that the persecution was not as intense against them as it was against the Hellenists. Still, James will soon be martyred and Peter will be imprisoned again. The apostles certainly did not find life in Jerusalem to be easy.

The point that Luke is drawing our attention to here is that the church was scattered as a result of this persecution. This was a bad thing, right? Well, yes and no. Persecution is never a good thing in and of itself. But the Lord is able to take something like this and use it to accomplish his purposes. And that is exactly what he did. It was through this persecution that Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 began to reach their fulfillment. Remember what Jesus had said to his disciples: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The Lord used persecution to scatter the church into the regions of Judea and Samaria so that the gospel could be preached there. That is what we will see taking place in the remainder of chapter 8. And then in chapter 9, the Lord will take the man who led this persecution, Saul, and turn him into the missionary to the Gentiles.

Do you see the contrast here? The church experienced persecution, but the Lord used it for the spread of the gospel. This is an example of the doctrine that is sometimes referred to as *concursum*, a sub-category of the doctrine of divine providence. The doctrine of *concursum* says that the Lord is able to work out his purposes through the acts of human beings who have no intention of serving him. The classic example of *concursum* is found in the story of Joseph, who told his brothers that what they intended for evil, God intended for good. We see the

same thing in this passage in Acts. It was certainly not Saul's intention that his persecution of the church would result in the spread of the gospel, but that is what the Lord accomplished through his actions.

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Stephen's death testifies to the importance of cultivating a heavenly-minded approach to life. With the eyes of faith, we too can see what Stephen saw in his vision. And when we see Jesus standing as our advocate at the throne of God, we will be emboldened to bear any burden that he calls us to bear. We will be confident that nothing, not tribulation, not distress, not even death itself will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. As Derek Thomas observes,

"The sight of heaven opening up before [Stephen], disclosing the glory of God and the sovereign rule of Jesus, made him see with a different perspective the things that were happening to his body. He was on his way home to be with his Savior. He was at death's door, and on the other side were the arms of Jesus waiting to embrace him.

What was true for Stephen is true for every believer who dies: Jesus is waiting to receive each one. 'Away from the body... at home with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5:8)." [*Acts*, REC, 210]