

Bible Study 24 – Acts 7:54-60 – Stephen’s Martyrdom

Text: Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together[b] at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

1. The Establishment is seething at Stephen’s defence: Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

a) They are enraged by his conviction and confidence...

b) They are enmity with him because they are enemies of Christ and his gospel...

c) They are now completely lacking in empathy and are determined to cancel Stephen and the gospel he proclaimed and served others by... they are like frenzied animals with a kill – they ground their teeth...

2. Stephen by contrast evinces serenity: But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

a) Stephen received grace... he was full of the Holy Spirit – the Comforter, the Counsellor, the Helper... And even in such a harrowing and hate-filled situation, Stephen displays the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...

b) Stephen beheld God’s glory... like the Apostle John would later experience while banished on the island of Patmos, where the gates of heaven were opened to him to see that glorious vision of heavenly glory which he recorded in the Book of Revelation, so Stephen experiences a heavenly vision. Pointing him and reassuring him of his destination...

c) Stephen moreover beheld the King of glory, his Saviour... standing rather than sitting at the right hand of the Father, interceding for him at the Throne of Grace and ready to receive the martyr into his Father House...

3. Stephen’s statement reveals what he saw: And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

a) Stephen has an advocate with the Father... an Intercessor in the person of Jesus, who was crucified, dead and buried. And who rose again and ascended to the right-hand of the Father... where his ministry of Prophet, Priest, and King continues...

b) Stephen is accepted in the Beloved... he is a recipient of the good news that he was persecuted for...

c) Stephen has access in the present and forever as a believer in Christ and a beloved child of the Father through the Spirit of adoption.

The words of the apostle come to mind when he wrote that God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control (2Tim.1:7). Even in the face of such brutal injustice, Stephen exemplifies this text...

4. Stephen is seized, dragged outside of Jerusalem, and is stoned to death:

57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

a) Stephen’s adversaries act in haste and do so unjustly. They have lost all reason and rush like a furious mob at Stephen. Despite not having the power of capital punishment which was reserved to the Roman Governors at that time, they are determined to dispense mob justice by

putting Stephen to death outside of the city walls... a sign and symbol that he is cursed. Tragically, they are cursing themselves and not he...

You may recall how Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. In other words, he was cursed. He who knew no sin was made sin for us... The Book of Revelation also uses similar symbolism: Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (Rev.22:14-15).

b) Stephen's adversaries are full of hatred, dragging him outside the Holy City to stone him to death... But for Stephen death is gain, for it is to enter the immediate presence of Christ... Underneath are the everlasting arms. His destiny is secure...

c) A young man called Saul enthusiastically watches the scene and the garments of the witnesses who threw the first rocks at Stephen. Here is a young man in training for the ministry full of zeal for the traditions of his fathers and bitterly opposed to Christ, his gospel, and his church. As we shall discover from chapter 9 this young man will soon encounter the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. He will repent and believe and faithfully and fruitfully serve and suffer for Christ and his cause for the remainder of his life. He, like Stephen will be martyred for the faith. And we know him best as the Apostle Paul.

5. Stephen seals his martyrdom by supplicating the Lord: And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

There are clearly parallels with Christ's own death.

a) Stephen prayed to the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit, just as Jesus prayed to his Father and gave up his Spirit...

b) Stephen asked the Lord to pardon his enemies for their sin and their sinful murder, just as Jesus prayed 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' Stephen prayed in a loud voice, so that the people might hear, repent, and believe. He sought the salvation even of his avowed enemies up until his last breath...

c) Stephen died in the Lord. He entered his rest where he would have heard Jesus say to him, 'well done good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master.'

Questions

1) What do you think was the key to Stephen's calmness and courage in the face of death?

2) What does this passage teach us about the continuing ministry of Jesus?

3) Place yourself in the shoes of the young man guarding the garments of those throwing rocks at Stephen! What do you see and hear? What do you think? How do you feel?

4) Are we willing to seek the good of all, even those who are avowed enemies of the gospel? Should we pray for such people? Why?