

Stephen

Opening Hymn: Appendix D — “E’en Though It Be A Cross”

Rev. 2:10 Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.

Stephen is called the first Christian martyr. The dictionary defines a *martyr* as “One who CHOOSES to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles.” The idea that martyrs choose death is surprising. But we would certainly say Jesus chose death by the things he did rather than renounce his religious principles. Such was also the case with Stephen. We begin with Acts chapter 6.

Acts 6:1,2 And in those days when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve ... said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

Who are these Grecians and Hebrews? Both were Jews, of course. The gospel had not yet gone unto Gentiles. The Grecians were Jews who spoke Greek; the Hebrews were Jews who spoke Hebrew (or, among the common people, Aramaic).

The complaint (vs. 1): the Hebrew-speaking widows were receiving most of the charity at the expense of the Greek-speaking widows. Widows were dependent upon charity since few women worked outside their home. When a husband died, the means of support for the wife usually died with him.

The congregation considered this problem and selected seven individuals to be responsible for serving the food. All seven have Greek names and may all have been Greek-speaking. If that is so, their selection may have been an over-reaction to the fact that it was the Greek-speaking Jews who complained about their widows. The first of the seven is:

Acts 6:5 And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...

The top of my Bible titles this column, “Stephen the deacon,” even though the Greek word *diakonos*—Strong’s 1249 meaning servant—is not used in this account. But Strong’s 1248, translated *ministration* in verse 1, and Strong’s 1247, translated *serve* in verse 2, do appear. That’s close enough to call Stephen a deacon. But we’re not interested in Stephen because of his deacon duties; we want to consider his activities outside the church.

Just about all we know of Stephen is contained in the next few verses:

Acts 6:8-10 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. 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. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

Consider that phrase, “Synagogue of the Libertines.” The Libertines were Jews who had been carried captive to Rome, then liberated at a much later time. Thus it appears Stephen’s activities are among Greek-speaking Jews. Clearly he has an excellent knowledge of truth. His service activities within his ecclesia don’t stop his witness activities to the outside world. And his knowledge of the truth is so keen his enemies cannot win arguments by logic. So they try deceit:

Acts 6:13-15 They set up false witnesses which said, This man [said] ... this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Since the writer of Acts was not sitting in the council, how did he know what kind of face Stephen had? We'll try to answer that question a bit later. In any event, Stephen is about to have an experience similar to Jesus. False witnesses say he wants to destroy the temple and change the law of Moses. Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and forced to answer these charges. What did Stephen really think about the temple and the law? That's in the next chapter.

Acts Chapter 7

Because we know how this experience is going to turn out, it's easy to picture a hostile Sanhedrin looking for any excuse to kill. But that's not the case. The ones who hated Stephen were the Greek-speaking Jews, not the Sanhedrin. And the high priest just had an experience in chapter 5 with the apostles. He had them thrown into prison—the angel of the Lord released them from prison—they seized them again—Peter said he was going to obey God and not men and that the Sanhedrin was responsible for the death of Jesus—they wanted to kill the apostles—and then they got some good advice:

Acts 5:38-40: [Gamaliel, a Pharisee, speaks] Refrain from these men and let them alone: for if this counselor this work be of men, it will come to naught: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. And to him they agreed.

We should try to remember this scripture whenever we don't like what some other class or person is doing and we think it's our job to put a stop to it.

The APOSTLES were a much greater threat to the council than Stephen. If the Sanhedrin decided not to kill the apostles, it's hard to believe they intended to kill Stephen. However, Stephen's enemies are the ones forcing the issue. The drama opens with the high priest:

Acts 7:1: Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

What things? The temple and the law of Moses. When we read Stephen's defense, we must understand it is these two issues which he addresses. He selectively draws upon Israel's history to make his defense. This is what he says:

1. God worked with Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia. [verses 2-7]
2. God dealt with our forefathers in the land of Egypt. [verses 8-19]
3. God dealt with Moses in the land of Midian; at the burning bush we learn the land itself was to be considered holy. [verses 20-34]
4. Moses, the one who was initially rejected as a leader, led the people to freedom. [verses 35-36]
5. Moses prophesied about one to come, like himself. But the people wouldn't listen to him, preferring to make an idol of a gold. [verses 37-46]
6. Solomon built a temple for God, but also said God does not live in a temple made with hands. [verses 47-50]

Let's summarize the case for the defense so far: Since the Jews believed the temple represented God's presence, Stephen selects examples of God working with those who love him even when they're not in the promised land. Solomon himself said God didn't live in a man-made temple. So, Stephen's logic goes, why be so concerned about whether this temple stands or falls?

And concerning the law of Moses, it was rejected by our forefathers in favor of an idol of gold, something they made with their own hands. You're worshipping the temple like a modern-day idol. The one who Moses said would come after him, has come, and like your forefathers, you have rejected him.

The council may not have initially realized where Stephen's defense was leading them, but by now, they got the picture. Clearly something happened in council chambers. We don't know what it was, but everything changed. Stephen stops his defense and launches into a counter-charge of his own:

Acts 7:51-53 Ye stiffnecked 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 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.

Strong stuff, but not any stronger than what Peter said in chapter 5 when he addressed this same council. Undoubtedly the Greek-speaking enemies of Stephen roared their disapproval of this old testament quote about God not living in a temple made with hands. Stephen could, at this point, simply remain silent and he would undoubtedly have been beaten and released. But he "CHOSE to suffer death rather than renounce religious principles." He kept talking. And what he said next, sealed his doom:

Acts 7:56 Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

This is the greatest blasphemy possible to a Jew. Stephen claimed to see God, the God who had once told Moses that no man could look upon his face and live. How dare he say he sees God! Besides, they thought God lived in the temple, not up there in the sky!

Questions about the temple and the law of Moses fade into insignificance next to this outrage. Although the council was forbidden to execute anyone without the approval of Rome, an angry mob rushes at Stephen and...

Acts 7:58-60 they 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. And they stoned Stephen, [who] called upon God, saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

This murder by an uncontrolled mob shows that they were indeed like their fathers who persecuted the prophets and slew those who talked about the coming of the Just One (vs. 52). It was the law of Moses [Deut. 17:7] that required the witnesses to cast the first stones. To make throwing easier they removed their outer garments and placed them at the feet of their leader Saul. It is soon over. Stephen dies and goes not to heaven, but to the death condition which the scriptures call "a sleep."

What a waste!

If we were looking for an outstanding leader in the early church, one of the best would be Stephen. When he is first introduced to us in chapter 6 and just before he dies in chapter 7 [vs. 55] the scriptures say he was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” It seems such a waste of a young life. Think of what he could have accomplished if he had lived! My dear brethren, think of what he accomplished in his DEATH!

First of all, consider Saul.

Acts 7:61 And Saul was consenting unto his death.

The Greek word rendered *consenting* implies much more than appears on the surface. It means *to agree to a course of action emphatically and with considerable pleasure*.

And why would Saul possibly care one way or another? Probably because as an expert debater he found he could not answer Stephen. In Acts 6:9, some from Cilicia disputed with Stephen. In Acts 22:3 Paul says he was a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia. I believe Saul was among those who disputed with Stephen, could not withstand his logical arguments, and hated him because of it. Stephen’s death would remove a “thorn in his side.” But did it?

Acts 26:14 [Paul is recounting his conversion on the Damascus road and says] And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard [painful] for thee to kick against the goad.

goad 1. A long stick with a pointed end used for prodding animals.

2. That which prods or urges; a stimulus or irritating incentive.

There is a difference of opinion about just what “goad” Saul was kicking against, but I believe Saul’s mind continued to return to the Stephen incident. He kept remembering that Stephen had really done nothing worthy of death, yet how Saul hated him because of his wondrous works and debating skill. And it is unlikely he ever forgot how Stephen responded to his enemies. Saul doesn’t ask the Lord what kicking against the goad is supposed to mean. He knew.

There is an interesting irony in Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Stephen said he saw the “son of man” standing at the right hand of God. Saul certainly considered this gross blasphemy and a good enough reason to *execute* Stephen. Yet that is almost exactly the same vision Saul himself had on the Damascus road.

So the FIRST ACCOMPLISHMENT of Stephen’s death was its effect on Saul. Although he never knew it at the time, Saul’s involvement with Stephen’s murder was to haunt him the rest of life and to give him a measure of humility:

1 Cor. 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

How did Luke know what Stephen’s face looked like when he appeared in front of the council. In fact, how did Luke know what Stephen said in such detail? The information probably came from an eye witness, and that eye witness must have been Paul. As far as Paul was concerned, his experiences with Stephen were unforgettable.

Stephen's death also accomplished a SECOND OBJECTIVE:

Acts 8:1 And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Prior to this time the early Christian church stayed close to home. But starting with the stoning of Stephen, the opponents of the truth became bold and increased the persecution upon all the disciples, scattering them into the surrounding country. And of course with this scattering came the preaching of the gospel into all the world. A short time later the first Gentile convert was welcomed into the fellowship and the message spread still farther.

A waste? Not at all. Few lives have done more in the service of the master than Stephen's. And with the conversion of Saul, we see the Lord raising up another to continue the work which was cut short by the death of one of his saints.

What can we learn from Stephen's life?

As we look back over the life of Stephen, what have we learned?

1. Stephen's assigned duties in the church didn't curtail his outside witnessing.

Our life together in the ecclesia is wonderful. But our commission is to preach the gospel message to those around us.

1 Cor. 9:16 Woe unto me, if I preach not the gospel!

2. He served his master enthusiastically even if it meant losing his own life.

Are we sacrificing anything for our master? More than that, are we doing our sacrificing enthusiastically? Persecution must not cause us to change our relationship to God. In fact, it is an evidence of the holy spirit in our lives:

2 Tim. 3:12 Yea, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

3. He loved his enemies.

And in this regard he followed the example of his master. It was hard enough for the people to understand what it meant to love their neighbor. But even that wasn't enough:

Matt. 5:44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.

4. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from start to finish.

Eph. 5:18 ... be filled with the spirit.

We can be filled with the spirit only to the degree we eliminate the spirit of the world in our hearts and lives.

5. His message: no one group has an exclusive relationship with God.

God does not live in a temple made with hands.

Isa. 57:15 For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.

From time to time God may do some mighty work using those who don't necessarily meet or agree with us. God should be allowed to direct the issue without interference from us.

Remember our opening text?

Rev. 2:10 Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.

The Greek article is present before the word crown. It isn't an ordinary crown of life, it is THE crown of life—the divine nature. There is no question Stephen made his calling and election sure. Stephen knew, as Paul did when he wrote his second letter to Timothy, that he had fought a good fight and...

2 Tim. 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.

Stephen fell asleep in death, but with the full assurance of his faithfulness. May we learn lessons from Stephen's life that we too may be found faithful.

Closing Hymn: #279 — "Take Up Thy Cross"

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