

## Stephen's Last Prayer

TEXT: "And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him."  
(Acts 8:2)

THESIS: Christians need not fear their enemies, but to continue in the doctrine of Christ holding on to their faith and being comforted in the hope of eternal life with God.

### INTRODUCTION:

1. Stephen was chosen by the apostles to continue in the work of the church.
  - a. He had been nominated to do this work by the whole Christian multitude that surrounded him.
  - b. He was known for being a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.
2. Stephen was a man of God and a humble servant.
  - a. He was dedicated to the Lord which was seen in his preaching where he spared no one the words that might convict them to turn their life around and follow in the footsteps of Christ.
  - b. This preaching leads him to the open doors of the synagogue for "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." (Acts 6:10)
3. However, people can do irrational things and while Stephen spoke to those who desired to hear the words of the Lord, these same people brought in "suborned men which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." (Acts. 6:11)
  - a. The people became stirred by this underhanded perjury and not only took this as the truth, but they also took Stephen out of that place and before the council to set up false witnesses and charges before him because he claimed that Jesus would change the customs which Moses had once given.
  - b. They were unaware that Stephen knew "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah": (Heb. 8:7. 8)
4. This new covenant mentioned would destroy the old covenant and those in the synagogue became fearful of the change.
  - a. Sometimes because of change, people can do irrational things.
  - b. Some people can have so much pride that they are right and that they overlook the possibility that they could be wrong.
5. This is where Stephen's ability to preach the Gospel was heightened as he stood before the council and the rest of the synagogue, false witnesses and the mob.
6. Stephen let the words of Christ flow and we will spend some time speaking about:
  - a. The man who pierced the hearts of men with words.
  - b. The unwarranted behavior of the listeners.
  - c. Stephen's remembrance of God and compassion for his listeners.

## DISCUSSION:

## I. THE MAN WHO PIERCED THE HEARTS OF MEN WITH WORDS

- A. After his speech, Stephen said, “And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56)
1. Stephen described his vision to the frenzied people.
    - a. Being full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55) he says the name, “Son of man” which title was never applied by the mouth of any apostle or evangelist before him.
      - (1) Stephen, being led by the Holy Spirit, repeated the very words which Jesus himself, before this same council, had foretold in his glorification assuring those who were listening that this exaltation of the Son of man which they were once witnesses to, had already begun and was actual. (Matt. 26:64)
    - b. It is interesting to note that Jesus is seen standing on the right hand of God when he is usually mentioned as sitting.
    - c. But, Jesus was well aware of what was happening, especially when it was of his own, Stephen.
- B. But, perhaps we may not know what was said in the synagogue which brought concern to the Libertines, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, Cilicians, and to those of Asia.
- C. Stephen had spoken of the connection from Abraham, to Moses, to Christ.
1. Abraham’s seed was to flourish even when later in time the patriarchs would move with envy and sell Joseph into slavery.
  2. Later, a king arose which knew not Joseph who killed the people of God during the days of Moses until Moses stood with God.
    - a. Moses, a prophet of God became the deliverer but was despised by many who would not obey and desired to go back into Egyptian slavery.
    - b. The people desired other gods who because of this, were taken away into bondage.
  3. Then the people were released in which David, who found favor before God, desired to find a tabernacle for God which Solomon built.
    - a. But, the Lord did not dwell in material things because Heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool.
    - b. Stephen continued to preach that Christ made all things and “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” (Jn. 1:3)
- D. Stephen was strong in his conviction to preach to the lost including those individuals who had earlier crucified Christ.
1. He said that their fathers before them had the words of God and they were following after their fathers steps.
  2. He made it known that their fathers had persecuted the prophets including

those who spoke of the “coming the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.” (Acts. 7:52)

- E. Furthermore, he continued to tell the people that they had not kept the law that they claimed to hold so dear in their hearts and because of this conviction, the people were cut to the heart and could not hear any more.
1. Now this was unlike those who were pricked or cut to the heart as recorded in Acts 2:37 for when Peter spoke, they wanted to know what to do and Peter told them to repent and be baptized.
  2. But in Acts 7 before the Sadducees, there was a different tune for instead of repenting, they gnashed on him with their teeth.
    - a. Stephen had sent a saw through their hearts which rasped them to the bone to the point that they could no longer restrain themselves and his speech was violently interrupted.
    - b. They became bitter and malignant and thirsted for the blood just like a pack of hungry, snarling wolves.
  3. However, notice that if they could have answered him, how different would have been their temper of mind.

## II. THE UNWARRANTED BEHAVIOR OF THE LISTENERS

- A. The people had not been able to resist in debate, and when they could not win the debate, “Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,” (Acts 7:57)
1. They did not want to hear any more from Stephen that they had killed Jesus or by his declaration that Stephen saw Jesus so exalted because they knew that they convicted Christ of a crime which was now recoiling terribly upon their heads.
    - a. The message of Christ that Stephen spoke of was something that the Sadducees strongly rejected.
    - b. Furthermore, this message enraged them because he was indicating that Christ was coequal with God.
  2. Therefore, since the Sadducees saw this as the strongest example of blasphemy, they rushed with fearful rapidity because they knew that this fearful proof against them indicated that they had murdered an innocent man, Jesus.
    - a. They were determined not to suffer a man and so no trial was had; no vote was taken; no question was raised about the right thing to do, they simply rushed upon him like the hogs did down the cliff when the demons entered them. (Lk. 8:33)
    - b. The whole body of 70 rabbis, whose official duty was to watch for the faithful and regular proceedings of law, was seen leaving their seats, and rushing with the mob in wild violence, outcrying and in rage to suddenly execute a man who was untried and uncondemned.

- B. The maddest prank played upon this earth is witnessed when wicked men set themselves in uncompromising opposition to God and his holy truth.
  - 1. In present day, when such opposition is to be sustained, no well informed man expects aught else than disregard of all the rules of justice and propriety.
  - 2. This was an act of desperation on their parts and is often labeled today as the Madman's Drama.
- C. But now they went a step farther as 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." (Acts 7:58)
  - 1. The people were going to kill him, but one thing that we see in this verse is that Saul was among them holding the people's clothes and bearing witness of Stephen's death.
  - 2. Saul had been given the responsibility of holding their outer garments so they would have free access with their arms.
  - 3. The people were going to stone Stephen and then prove after he was dead that their actions were just.

### III. STEPHEN'S REMEMBRANCE OF GOD AND COMPASSION FOR HIS LISTENERS

- A. Stephen knew what their actions were going to be and instead of running for his life or picking up stones in retaliation against them, Stephen begins to speak two short prayers to God.
  - 1. In the very hour of his death, Stephen remembered God.
  - 2. He does not focus on his physical existence or the pain of sharp objects being thrown at him, but rather on his eternal life.
- B. Therefore, he begins praying to God for himself.
  - 1. "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59)
    - a. Christians like Stephen knew that he could expect a mansion of rest that was prepared for him by loving hands. (Jn. 14:2)
    - b. He knew that there was an everlasting habitation. (Lk. 16:9)
  - 2. It is ironic that Stephen spoke these particular words for "when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." (Lk. 23:46)
    - a. Both Stephen and Christ knew that at death, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." (Eccl. 12:7)
    - b. Stephen was preparing to make his journey into Paradise, but he did not stop his words here.
- C. Stephen then prayed a second prayer for those who were about to murder him.
  - 1. He could have asked God to strike them dead or to deliver him from their hands, but instead "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."

(Acts 7:60)

- a. This prayer was a selfless prayer similar to the words Jesus spoke when they persecuted him.
    - (1) For the Lord earlier stated, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Lk. 23:34)
    - (2) Stephen knew well that the spirit of Christ is a spirit of forgiveness.
    - (3) “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”; (Matt. 5:44)
  - b. Stephen knew the truth while holding firmly onto his faith in the Lord even at a time such as this when he drew his last breath, fell asleep and his physical life ceased to exist.
- D. Imagine the deep and lasting impression Stephen made.
1. What did others see when Stephen was kneeling in prayer?
    - a. His body was being pelted with rocks, yet he still found the strength in himself to kneel before God in prayer.
    - b. It is amazing to see that his last moments on earth were spent in prayer and not condemning those who were unwilling to spare their anger.
  2. The young man Saul who witnessed these things, never forgot it.
    - a. At first, right after this event, Saul felt pleased taking pleasure or applauded the efforts of the Sadducees and the mob. (Acts 8:1)
    - b. However, later he makes sad mention of the part he took in these dreadful proceedings “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.” (1 Tim. 1:13)
- E. Christians had struggled on faithfully thus far, and with many tears, some stripes, and much affliction because they had still found a deep satisfaction for their own soul in the service of the Lord.
1. Their faith sustained them in life, even amid very bitter trials.
  2. But before this incident, it was not yet known how their faith would sustain them in the hour of death.
    - a. How great the strength, therefore, and how sweet the consolation imparted to every heart, when the first who died was so triumphant in the pangs of death!
    - b. Stephen became the first Christian martyr for preaching the Gospel of Christ and yet his faith held him faithful and strong until he was no longer able to speak the precious words of Christ to others that was so cherished and loved by him.

CONCLUSION:

1. Stephen was a servant of Christ.
  - a. He had served faithfully even until his last breath.
  - b. He was able to stand in front of those accusing him of wrong and defend not himself, but the Gospel.
2. He loved God with all his heart and was willing to lay his life on the line for Him because he knew that a physical life was not as important as his spiritual everlasting life.
  - a. He had the hope of Heaven in his minds and to see the glorious Father in Heaven.
  - b. He did not need to spend his last breaths fighting against those who were killing him.
    - i. Instead, he continued to teach and to hold his faith close to him as he closed his eyes for the last time.
    - ii. Stephen died for the glory of God.
3. His name continues to inspire others and to show that after all kinds of persecutions or trials that we may endure, we are able as Stephen was able, to hold on to our faith until our last breath never letting go of it.
  - a. We can read how our bodies will turn back into dust, but our spirit will last forever.
  - b. Where that spirit goes after death, God leaves up to us.
4. For Stephen just like Lazarus, desired to be with God no matter if it meant losing our health, money, or our life.
  - a. However, just like the rich man, we can become so greedy, stubborn or arrogant with self preservation, that we simply miss the mark.
  - b. Therefore, we are to continue on and “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:14)