

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (31-7-94 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

## Stephen's Death

Acts 7:54-8:1

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 22:3-21

### Introduction

The subject of death is one which we are often reluctant to speak of and to dwell on. And yet it is something which every one of us will face, unless Christ returns before then. Apart from Christ's death, no death is dealt with in such detail in the New Testament as that of Stephen. We are going to consider the circumstance of his death, the results which, in the providence of God, followed that death, and teaching about death for us.

### The circumstances of Stephen's death

Following his arrest on the charge of blasphemy, Stephen had preached a sermon on Israel's history, demonstrating how it was they, not he, who had resisted God and rejected His will. He finished with a most serious accusation, that they were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart (Acts 7:51). This may seem strange to us, but they knew what he was talking about.

Stiff-necked, stubborn and obstinate was the description used by Moses and the prophets to describe Israel in Exodus 32:9; 33:3; Deuteronomy 9:6,13; 2 Chronicles 30:8; Jeremiah 17:23. Uncircumcised in heart, heathen and godless at heart, deaf to God's truth, disobedient, were familiar words to them, from Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:6; Jeremiah 6:10; Ezekiel 44:7. And the accusations were still true of the descendants of the people to whom Moses and the prophets had spoken. They were just like their fathers.

They had always resisted the Holy Spirit, Christ and the Law of God. They had persecuted the prophets God had sent, and now they had betrayed and murdered the Son that God had sent. Despite being a privileged people who had God's law and revelation, they had rejected it rather than obey it.

We can well imagine the fury that Stephen's accusation caused. They gnashed their teeth like wild animals, and when he said he could see Jesus at God's right hand, they covered their ears, yelled at the top of their voices, rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him. The hatred of men to the light is seen in the treatment of Stephen by the religious bigots. Religion does not change the heart. Often it embitters it. **Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil** (John 3:19). They were religious, but they were unregenerate men, who hated light as much as the atheist or agnostic.

The mob-lynching Romans at this time did not allow the Jews the right of passing and executing the death sentence. So the Jews took the law into their own hands. The mob seized Stephen and stoned him to death. In later times, when the Jews were allowed to stone people, they had a special place for stoning, and the drop from the stoning place was twice the height of a man, roughly 12 feet. One of the witnesses would push the

criminal from behind so that he fell face downward. Then he was turned on his back. If he had died from the fall, that was sufficient. If not, another witness took a heavy stone or boulder and threw it on the victim's heart. If he was still not dead, then everyone could join in until the victim was killed.

Stephen's was an awful death, but it was a triumphant death. He was full of the Holy Spirit; he looked up to heaven and saw God's glory and Jesus, as the Son of Man, standing at God's right hand. The term "Son of Man" is used 82 times in the Gospels, a term used for his heavenly figure in Daniel 7:13ff. In the presence of God, Christ rules God's everlasting kingdom, He has all authority, glory and sovereign power. He is worshipped by all people and nations. Jesus preferred this title to describe His Messiahship.

But why is Jesus seen standing here, when normally in the New Testament He is sitting, because His work is done (c.f. Hebrews 1:3,13; 10:12)? One possibility is that He is standing to receive His martyr, Stephen. Or maybe He is standing because here He is being Stephen's advocate – as Stephen had confessed Christ before men, so now Christ confesses Stephen before God (Luke 12:8).

Then in the final scene Stephen confesses the deity of the Lord Jesus: **Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."** (Acts 7:59,60). Then **he fell asleep**, a beautiful picture, amid all the hatred, fury, shouting and murdering, Stephen met his death with great calm and confidence, like a little child. He woke up in the bosom of the Lord. Sleep on this side, but fuller life than ever before on the other side. So commenced a richer life and deeper experience in the presence of God than ever he knew on earth. He was not alone in death. Although everybody was against him, God was there. Hence He had the strength to meet death, and amazing serenity at the last, and even love for his enemies at the last.

In the whole history of the Christian church, the believer finds strength to do, not least in death, things which it seems humanly impossible to do. George Wishart, an early Scottish martyr, kissed his executioner, saying, "So here is a token that I forgive thee."

#### Blessed results which followed

Stephen's death is a reminder to us that in this world, the man who lives for God and bears unflinching testimony to His truth and lives a strong consistent life, will not get away with it. Soon he will have a heavy price to pay. He may be secretly respected, but he will not be popular. In Stephen's case, his testimony brought an untimely death. It seemed such a waste. Why did God not spare him? Surely it weakened the Christian cause, now there was one less man to preach? Evil seemed to have triumphed. Satan seemed to have defeated God.

No – in the providence of God, results followed which would never have happened if Stephen had not died. God was glorified in the way Stephen died. His cause, His presence, His gracious support, His enabling of Stephen to die triumphantly, was all to God's glory, His power and His greatness.

Following Stephen's death, bitter persecution broke out. All but the Apostles were forced to leave Jerusalem. They were scattered all over Judea and the neighbouring country of Samaria. Saul was inflamed, and went from house to house, dragging men and women off to prison. But what happened? Those who were scattered and dispersed opened their mouths and preached the Word wherever they went. In other words, hundreds and thousands heard the Gospel who would never have heard it if there had been no persecution. How often God has turned persecution for good. He uses it to purify the Church and causes many more to hear the Word.

There was another blessing from the stoning of Stephen. It turned out to be one of the major factors which led to the conversion of Saul. He refers to it in his testimony in Acts 22:20. Witnesses laid their clothes at his feet, and he witnessed the suffering of Stephen, heard his words about Jesus at the right hand of God, heard him resign his soul to God and pray for his enemies. Saul saw Stephen die triumphantly. It made a deep impression. It made him redouble his efforts to crush the conviction. In the end, he realised the stones were no answer to the truth of the Gospel, and he was changed from bitter persecutor to fervent believer and the greatest missionary of all time. Augustine wrote, "The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen". Paul's attempts to quench the Spirit's light led to the kindling of a yet brighter lamp.

How the whole experience demonstrated the power of God to turn cursing into blessing, and cause adversity to work for good. It appeared to be an awful calamity, the loss of a great leader, the threat of extermination, bringing alarm and discouragement. And yet it was all under the sovereign hand of God and turned out to be for the furtherance of the Gospel and great enlargement of the church.

#### Teaching about death from this passage

Let's first of all remember that, unless Christ returns beforehand, we are all going to pass through that momentous experience of death. For any one of us it may be very close indeed, closer than we expect or hope. Because we forget the fact of death, the ungodly man lives at ease and the Christian walks carelessly.

We are all part of a procession that is always passing by. People are joining the procession and leaving the procession every minute of every day. All are moving to another and more real world. There is an Arab proverb that reminds us that the black camel stops at every man's door. It enters the king's palace and the poor man's cottage, in each case with the solemn summons "The master is come and calleth for thee". It has no respect for character, age, status or even health itself.

Secondly, as in Stephen's case, we can be summoned in the midst of service. He was an appointed officer of the church, caring for the poor of the fellowship, a strong testimony, effective and fearless preacher, a very useful and gifted leader, actively relieving the Apostles of some of their many burdens. Yet in the midst of this valuable service, death claimed him.

How often has that happened – the Christian mother, father, Sunday School teacher, preacher, missionary, pastor, died in the harness, in the prime of his or her usefulness. They seemed to be so necessary and so invaluable. But God is not dependent on any

man or woman. He can do without the choicest labourer. If God is thereby glorified, is that not well?

We are also to remember the importance of being prepared. Stephen knew the Lord, and was on very familiar terms with Him. He was ready to go, absolutely prepared, leaning solely on Christ. In Christ's hands is safety. We can, without fear, put ourselves in His hands in the hour of death. Note also how fully committed and yielded to God He was at the end of life, as at the beginning. He was full of the Holy Spirit at the end (Acts 7:55), as he was when he was appointed (Acts 6:5). His life had been lived full of faith, grace, power and the Holy Spirit. It was the secret of his courage, his grasp of the Scriptures, his vision of the Lord and his love for his enemies. Now he had peace at the end. At the end of life, being yielded to the Holy Spirit is so vital in the life. The prospect of death should have a quickening and challenging effect. It was said of Baxter that he preach "as if never sure he would preach again, a dying man to dying men."

Are you filled with the Spirit, and yielded to God? Your worldly affairs may be in order, you will may be made, you may be in a right relationship with everyone, have every matter settled, every letter written. But are you sure there is no work left undone? Is there not someone you ought to have spoken to about the Lord, but put it off? Would there be absolutely no cause of regret if you were taken this hour? John Wesley said to his brother Charles about the early Methodists, "Our people die well."

What consolation can we expect at the end? If Jesus was ever a living bright reality to Stephen it was in the hour of death. He had no need to fear death, for he was not going to be forsaken at the end. The One who loved us and gave Himself for us will not let us go. Spurgeon said, "When we were born, everyone smiled, but we cried. And when we die, everyone will cry, but we can smile." Many believers in their last moments on earth have supernatural glimpses of divine splendour. They have seen the Lord and His glory beyond description, and there is a freshness about their descriptions that they never got from books. These glimpses have led to perfect joy, acquiescence in God's will and patience in suffering. Dying grace in dying moments is adequate. There are lessons to be learned from deathbeds that can be learned nowhere else.

R.M.McCheyne always visited the dying on a Saturday. He said "I always like to look over the verge before I preach on Sunday." Brownlow North (1875) said, "Jesus came to me and said 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee'. 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin' is the verse on which I am now dying. I want nothing more. I used to have great terror of death. That has quite gone now. I am resting on Christ and I have perfect peace."

Will our death be full of Christ? We shall die as we have lived. If we know Christ in life, we will know Him in death, and vice versa. As then, so now.