

PAUL: A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST

By

F. B. Meyer, B. A.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“THY MARTYR STEPHEN”

(Acts 22:20)

“He heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Tho’ cursed, and scorn’d and bruised with stones.

“But looking upward, full of grace,
He prayed, and from a happy place
God’s glory smote him on the face.”
- Tennyson

THE method of God’s introduction of his greatest servants to the world differs widely. In some cases they rise gradually and majestically, like the dawn, from the glimmer of childhood’s early promise to the meridian of mature power and usefulness. In other cases they flash like the lightning on the dark abyss of night.

Sometimes God charges a man with a message, and launches him forth suddenly and irresistibly. Such a man was John the Baptist, with his “**It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife**”; such also was Savonarola, of Florence; with many another. And such was Stephen.

We know little or nothing of his antecedents. That he was a Hellenist Jew is almost certain; and that he had personally known and consorted with the Son of Man, whom he afterwards recognized in his glory, is more than probable. But of father, mother, birthplace, and education, we know nothing. We have the story of one day, the record of one speech that day his last, that speech his apology and defense for his life.

He reminds us of a cloud, not specially distinguishable from its companions, which has helped to form the leaden covering of the sky during an overcast afternoon; we had not noticed it, indeed, the sun had set without even touching it; but when the orb of day has passed beneath the horizon,

the cloud catches its departing rays, and becomes saturated and steeped with fire.

See how it burns with glory! Its very heart is turned to flame! For a few moments the light remains, and it is gone! So Stephen caught for a brief space the glory of the departed Lord, and, reflecting it, was transformed into the same image; “**and all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on Him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.**”

Stephen’s life and death must always have attracted reverent interest; but how much more so as we trace his influence on the method, thought, and character of the great Apostle, whose life work it became to perpetuate and render permanent what was rarest and noblest in the Church’s first deacon and martyr.

I. THE MOVEMENT OF WHICH STEPHEN WAS THE PRODUCT AND REPRESENTATIVE MAY FOR A MOMENT CLAIM OUR ATTENTION

It casts a suggestive sidelight on the career of “**the young man Saul.**”

Three streams of thought were meeting in tumultuous eddies in Jerusalem.

There were the Jews of the Pharisee party, represented by Gamaliel, Saul of Tarsus, and other notable men.

They were characterized by an intense religiousness, which circled around their ancestry, their initial rite, their law, their temple.

- Were they not Abraham’s children?
- Had not God entered into special covenant relations with them, of which circumcision was the outward sign and seal?
- Were they not zealous in their observance of the law, which had been uttered amid the thunder peals of Sinai, not for themselves alone, but for the world?
- Had not their rabbis added to it an immense number of minute and careful regulations, to which they yielded scrupulous and anxious obedience?

And as for the Temple, the whole of their national life was anchored to the spot where it stood. There was the only altar, priesthood, shrine, of which their religion admitted. Though the Temple might be a den of thieves, and Jerusalem full of uncleanness, they felt that no harm could befall them, no fiery storm overwhelm.

Like their forefathers in Jeremiah’s days, they trusted in lying words, saying, “**The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, are these**”; but had no thought of amending their ways and their doings. Narrow, casuistical, bigoted, intensely fanatical; priding themselves on their national privilege as the chosen people, but resentful against the appeals of the greatest of their prophets; counting on the efficacy of their system, but careless of personal character such was the orthodox and conservative Jewish party of the time.

Next came the Hebrew Christian Church, led and represented by the Apostles.

To culture and eloquence they laid no claim. Of founding a new religious organization they had no idea. That they should ever live to see Judaism superseded by the teaching they were giving, or Christianity existing apart from the system in which they had been nurtured, was a thought which, in the furthest flights of their imagination, never occurred to them.

Their Master had rigorously observed the Jewish rites and feasts; and they followed in his steps, and impressed a similar course of action on their adherents. The Church lingered still in the portals of the synagogue. The disciples observed the hours of prayer, were found in devout attendance at the Temple's services, had their children circumcised, and would not have dreamed of being released from, the regulations that bound the ordinary Jews as with iron chains.

And it seems certain that, if nothing had happened of the nature of Stephen's apology and protest, the Church would have become another Jewish sect, distinguished by the piety and purity of its adherents, and by their strange belief in the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Lastly, there were the converts from among the Hellenist Jews.

In Acts 6:1, these are distinctly referred to; and in verse 9 the various synagogues in which they were wont to meet are enumerated of these Stephen was the holy and eloquent exponent.

The origin of the Hellenist or Grecian Jews must be traced back to the captivity, which God overruled to promote the dissemination of Jewish conceptions throughout the world. It was but a small contingent that returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah and Ezra; the vast majority elected to remain in the land of their adoption for purposes of trade. They slowly spread thence throughout Asia Minor to the cities of its seaboard and the highland districts of its interior, planting everywhere the synagogue, with its protest on behalf of the unity and the spirituality of God.

Egypt, and especially Alexandria; Greece, with her busy commercial seaports; Rome, with her imperial cosmopolitan influence became familiar with the peculiar physiognomy and customs of this wonderful people, who always contrived to secure for themselves a large share of the wealth of any country in which they had settled. But their free contact with the populace of many lands wrought a remarkable change on them.

Whilst the Jews of Jerusalem and Judaea shrank from the defiling touch of heathenism, and built higher the wall of separation, growing continually prouder, more bitter, more narrow, the Jews that were scattered through the world became more liberal and cosmopolitan.

They dropped their Hebrew mother tongue for Greek; they read the Septuagint version of the Scriptures; their children were influenced by Greek culture and philosophy; they became able to appreciate the purposes of God moving through the channels of universal history; they learned that though their fathers had received the holy oracles for mankind, yet God had nowhere left Himself without witness.

Compelled, as they were, to relinquish the Temple with its holy rites, except on rare and great

occasions, when they travelled from the ends of the earth to be present at some great festival, they magnified in its place the synagogue, with its worship, its reading of the law, its words of exhortation; and they welcomed to its precincts all who cared to avail themselves of its privileges, and to set their faces towards the God of Abraham.

Many of these open-minded Hellenist Jews, when they had passed the meridian of their days in successful trade, came back and settled in Jerusalem. The different countries from which they hailed were represented by special synagogues: one of the Libertines who had been freed from slavery, one of the Cyrenians, one of the Alexandrians, one of them of Cilicia and of Asia. The mention of the latter is specially interesting when we recall that the chief city of Cilicia was Tarsus.

After some years of absence, Paul returned to settle at Jerusalem. It is possible that its Jewish leaders, having been impressed by his remarkable talents and enthusiastic devotion to Judaism, had summoned him to take part in, or lead, that opposition to Christianity, to which events were daily more irrevocably committing them. It is almost certain, also, that to facilitate his operations he was at this time nominated to a seat in the Sanhedrim, which enabled him to give his vote against the followers of Jesus (Acts 26:10).

His first impressions about the followers of “**the Way**,” as the early disciples were termed, were wholly unfavorable. It seemed to him sheer madness to suppose that the crucified Nazarene could be the long-looked-for Messiah, or that He had risen from the dead. He, therefore, threw himself into the breach, and took the lead in disputing with Stephen, who had just been raised to office in the nascent Church; and, not content with the conservative and timid attitude which the Apostles had preserved for some five years, was now leading an aggressive and forward policy.

II. THE BURDEN OF STEPHEN’S TESTIMONY

which he gave with such wisdom and grace in the synagogues of Jerusalem, and especially in the Cilician, may be gathered from his apology, which, while touching chords that vibrated most deeply in the hearts of his hearers, and appearing merely to rehearse the great story of the past, was intended as his own vindication and defence.

It is a marvellous address, the whole meaning of which can only be realized when his position and circumstances are borne in mind.

- It was the first attempt to read the story of God’s dealings with Israel in the light of Christ;
- The earliest commentary on the Old Testament by the New;
- The fragmentary draft of the Epistle to the Hebrews;
- The suggestion to at least one of his hearers of a deeper way of studying the lessons of Mosaism.

The mystery which had been hidden from ages and generations, and which was probably still hidden even from the Apostles, was made known to this Christian Hellenist Jew.

His eyes were the first that were opened to see that the old covenant was becoming old, and was

nigh to vanishing away, because on the point of being superseded by that better hope, through which all men might draw nigh to God. Can we not imagine those eager disputings in the Cilician synagogue between these two ardent and vehement spirits, close akin at heart, as the future would show, though now apparently so far divided. Each thoroughly versed in Scripture, each agile in argument and strong of soul, each devoted to the holy traditions of the past; but the one blinded by an impenetrable vail, whilst to the other Heaven was open, and the Son of Man was revealed standing at the right hand of God.

Like most who speak God's truth for the first time, Stephen was greatly misunderstood. We gather this from the charges made against him by the false witnesses, whom the Sanhedrim suborned. They accused him of uttering blasphemous words against Moses, of speaking against the Temple and the law, of declaring that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the Temple, and change the customs delivered by Moses. And as we attentively follow his argument, we can see how it was that these impressions had been caused.

Saul would expatiate on the glories of the Temple, standing on the site where for centuries the Lord had been worshipped. But Stephen would insist that any holy soul might worship God in the temple of his own soul; that there was no temple in the old time when God spake to Abraham and the patriarchs; that David was discouraged from building one; and that at the time of its dedication Solomon expressly acknowledged that God did not dwell in temples made with hands.

Saul would insist on the necessity of the rite of circumcision. But Stephen would argue that it could not be all-important, since God made promises to Abraham long before that rite was instituted.

Saul would show the unlikelihood of Jesus being God's Deliverer, because He was unrecognized by the leaders and shepherds of Israel. Stephen would rejoin that there was nothing extraordinary in this, since Joseph had been sold for jealousy, and Moses rejected on three distinct occasions. **"Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?"**

Saul said that all the prophets pointed to the glorious advent of the Messiah. Stephen reviewed Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, and showed that it behooved the Christ to suffer.

Saul affirmed that nothing could supersede Moses. Stephen quoted Moses himself as asserting that the Lord God would raise up a greater prophet than himself.

All this Stephen affirmed with the greatest reverence and awe. He spoke of the God of Glory; of the great ones of the past as **"our fathers"**; of the angel that spake at Sinai; and the living oracles of Scripture.

And yet it is undeniable that he saw with undimmed vision that Jesus of Nazareth must change the customs which Moses delivered, and lead his Church into more spiritual aspects of truth.

How little he weened that he was dropping seed-germs into the heart of his chief opponent, that were to bear harvests to one hundredfold nay, to many millions-fold, through the centuries, and in the broad harvest field of the world!

Thus a plant may yield one white flower, but the seeds it drops may live and bloom again in uncounted springs.

But as the battle rose and fell within the walls of that Cilician synagogue, it was an amazing conflict.

- Here ancient authority, there individual responsibility.
- Here the bondage of the letter, there the freedom of the spirit.
- Here the priest and ecclesiastic, there the Spirit taught and led of God.
- Here bigotry and pride, there humility and insight.
- Here the shackles of the prison of the soul, there the open Heaven.

In miniature it was the battle of all the ages, the one eternal conflict between form and spirit, between a false religiousness and the religion of the soul, which stands unveiled before God.

III. HIS MARTYRDOM

We know little of Stephen's life.

It was more than probable, as we have already said, that he knew Jesus in his earthly life, for he instantly recognized Him in the heavenly vision. Perhaps he had followed Him during the latter part of his ministry; he could at least describe Him as the Righteous or Just One, as though he had had ample opportunity of appraising his blameless worth. Surely he must have seen Him die; for the traits of his dying beauty molded his own last hours.

How meekly to bear his cross; to plead for his murderers with a divine charity; to breathe his departing spirit into unseen hands; to find in death the gate of life, and amid the horror of a public execution the secret of calm and peace all these were rays of light caught from the Cross where his Master had poured out his soul unto death.

This, too, powerfully affected Paul.

- That light on the martyr's face;
- that evident glimpse into the unseen Holy;
- those words;
- that patience and forgiveness;
- that peace which enwrap his mangled body, crushed and bleeding, as he fell asleep he could never forget them.

Long years after, when a similar scene of hate was environing himself, he reverted to Christ's martyr, Stephen, and counted it a high honor meekly to follow in his steps.

Not only did he mould his own great speeches on the model of that never-to-be-forgotten address; not only did those conceptions of the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom affect his

whole after-teaching and ministry: but the very light that radiated from that strong, sweet, noble character seemed to have been absorbed by his spirit, to be radiated forth again in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in strifes, in tumults, in pureness, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in kindness, in the Holy Ghost, in love unfeigned. It is thus that the martyr Church has ever overcome by the word of her testimony, because the saints have loved not their lives even unto death.

- The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.
- The destruction of the flower is the scattering of its pollen.
- The hammer is broken on its anvil.
- The power of the persecutor is overcome by the patience of his victims.

Saul, at whose feet witnesses lay down their clothes, is catching up and assuming the mantle of the departing prophet and saint.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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