

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN THE FIRST MARTYR

(Acts 6:9-15; 7:1-60)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 7:37

1. Stephen was a remarkably good man (6:8).
2. He was an unusually capable expounder of Scripture (6:9-10).

His enemies could not resist him:

- A. Because of his wisdom.
 - B. Because of the Spirit in him.
 3. He was so judicious and pious that no true accusation could be found against him (6:11-14).
 4. He was a courageous yet humble defender of his faith (6:15).
- A. He showed that the servant of God must often stand alone (7:1-39).

This was true of Abraham, Joseph and Moses.

- B. He showed that he was a firm believer in the law of Moses (7:20-44).
C. He showed that the true worship of God had never been confined to one place.

This was true before and after the days of Solomon (7:47-49).

- D. He told them that they had the rebellious spirit of their fathers (7:51-52).
E. He told them that resisting the truth was resisting the Holy Spirit (7:51).
5. His death is a testimony that amidst the most terrible conditions the Christian may remain calm (7:55-56).
 6. His death is a testimony that Jesus will not forsake His disciples in the hour of death (7:55-56).
 7. His death furnishes a noble example of Christian forgiveness (7:60).
 8. His death furnishes us with the assurance that the Christian who has expired is in a state of comfort (7:59-60).

Every obstacle in the early church, up to this time, has been overcome to the glory of God and the growth of the church. After the death and resurrection of Christ when Peter preached the first sermon there were some who mocked and accused the disciples of drunkenness, but by the power of the Spirit the message so took hold of the people that three thousand were added to the church: “**Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls**” (2:41). Then followed the first miracle in the healing of the lame man and as a result the first opposition on the part of the rulers. But in the face of opposition all men glorified God: “**So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done**” (4:21) and the church continued to grow until the number was about five thousand: “**Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand**” (4:4). Then hypocrites found their way into the church and the first discipline was exercised by the immediate hand of God, and still believers were added, multitudes of men and woman: “**And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women**” (5:14).

As the church thus continued to grow the opposition developed into persecution, but even in the midst of this the disciples continued to multiply: “**And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied**” (6:1). Then dissention arose within the church, but in order to overcome that the first deacons were chosen and the number of the disciples multiplied exceedingly, even a great company of priests were added: “**And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith**” (6:7).

When the church thus overcame every obstacle and continued to grow her opponents became furious. They vented their wrath first against the man who most recently had grown into a wonderful leader, a man of great spirituality and power, accused him falsely, held a mock trial, rushed upon him with mob violence and stoned him to death.

We have seen that Stephen, one of the first deacons was a man full of grace and power, and that he wrought great wonders and signs among the people. We wish now to consider that portion of the record of his life which tells of the accusations which were brought against him, the defense which he made and his martyrdom.

HE WAS AN UNUSUALLY CAPABLE EXPOUNDER OF SCRIPTURE

When men from several synagogues attempted to counteract his teaching, “**they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake**” (6:9-10). Some from the synagogue of the Libertines or Freedmen: Cyrenians, from Cyrene in Africa: Alexandrians, from Alexandria, Egypt: some from Cilicia, a province in Asia Minor north of Cyprus: and some from Asia, which was probably the western part of Asia Minor the capital of which was Ephesus; these united their forces to try to destroy the influence of Stephen. These men were not able to hold their place when disputing with Stephen (1) because of his wisdom, and (2) because of the Spirit by which he spake.

Stephen had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit directed him in the interpretation and application of it. He was full of grace, and what he said was spoken in a Christ-like manner. His enemies could not anger or excite him.

Every expositor of Scripture, if he has considerable influence and is faithful in the application of its truth, will meet with men who will argue and try to resist his influence. He will be tempted to answer them sharply or to decline to talk with them, but the example of Stephen teaches him that though he may be greatly tempted and though he may not be able to convince his opponents he should continue to speak the truth to them in a humble and Christ-like spirit. There may be among his opponents some who, at a later day, may recall the words spoken and the Christian character of God's servant and may be helped and guided by them. Saul of Tarsus was probably of the synagogue of Cilicia and manifestly somewhere among the opponents of Stephen at this time. There were statements made by Saul after he became Paul which seem to indicate that his mind was running back to the hour when he listened to Stephen make his defense against his bitter foes. The influence of the Word of God is not confined to the moment when it is spoken. Unbelievers who hear may, many years afterward, be led to consider seriously the message at which they first scoffed, and may be saved.

HE WAS SO JUDICIOUS AND PIOUS THAT NO TRUE ACCUSATION COULD BE FOUND AGAINST HIM

Stephen's enemies were compelled to secure false witnesses, if they were to find any who would condemn him. The charges which they brought against him were not wholly false, but the interpretation of his statements were false. They charged him with blasphemy against Moses and against God. This was for the purpose of giving them an excuse to seize and arrest Stephen.

When they had brought him before the Sanhedrim they said: "**Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God . . . For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us**" (6:11, 14). Jesus had said that Jerusalem should be destroyed. He had said that the time would come when men would not worship at Jerusalem. Stephen had, in all probability, taught these facts. But when he had done so he had no doubt taught them that Jesus had come to fulfil the law and take the place of the sacrifices and ceremonies at Jerusalem. He had without doubt proved his statements to be Scriptural as Peter and John had done. We can see today, that what Stephen foretold has come true.

It is not likely that Saul of Tarsus was among those who helped to secure the false witnesses. He said afterward that he lived in good conscience, which he could not have said if he had aided in procuring false witnesses against a godly man. It is probable that there were others, with Saul, who were honest in their opposition to Stephen. It is one of the splendid things concerning Stephen that his character, like that of Daniel, was above reproach and that his teaching was true except as it was distorted and misrepresented. We may all covet a similar character.

HE WAS A COURAGEOUS YET HUMBLE DEFENDER OF HIS FAITH

His face appeared “**as it had been the face of an angel**” (6:15). He did not flinch when falsely accused or when in the presence of the mob. His address was largely historical. We may wonder why he spoke as he did, but if we think of the circumstances we will not be surprised. He was speaking to men who a little later formed into a mob. Under such circumstances one cannot speak as he would today when defending himself in one of our church courts. An angry group of men must be calmed and their attention gained before a defense can be made. Stephen dwelt at some length on their own national and religious history. He knew that they would listen to this if to anything. He also told the history in such a way that he showed his loyalty to Moses and to God, and that all that he had said had been foretold by the prophets whom they accepted.

1. He showed that the servant of God must stand alone (7:1-39).

This was true of Abraham. He had to leave his own country in order to worship God properly and without interference. He walked by faith, went where God told him to go, did what God wanted him to do, and his faith was rewarded.

Joseph had to stand alone. He was rejected and sold by his brethren. God cared for him and kept him in all his affliction and loneliness and made him a great blessing to his people and to the world.

Moses had to stand alone. Even his own people did not understand his mission and at first rejected him as their leader. He was an exile for forty years in the wilderness. But Moses whom they refused God sent to be a ruler and deliverer.

The greatest leaders of Israel had been persecuted and had been forced to stand alone. The inference was that they should not now condemn Stephen though he stood alone in the midst of the Sanhedrim.

The day has not yet passed when the servant of God must stand alone. Not often, at least in our land, is one likely to be subjected to persecution in the form of bodily injury as in ancient times, we are thankful that day has gone. But the day of the majority taking the wrong side and the minority taking the right side has not passed. The day when men will be hated and deserted of friends when they stand uncompromisingly for the right has not passed.

“Dare to be a Daniel:
Dare to stand alone:
Dare to have a purpose firm:
Dare to make it known.”

2. He showed that he was a firm believer in the law of Moses (7:20-44). He had been accused of blaspheming Moses. When given a chance to answer for himself he extolled Moses and the law. The ritual which was given by Moses, however, he showed to be temporary. There would be one who should come who would fulfill the law:

“This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear” (7:37).

3. He showed that the true worship of God has never been confined to one place. There had been true worship offered to God before the temple was built and while their fathers moved from place to place. Abraham had worshipped as he journeyed from place to place. Even when Solomon built a permanent house of worship, the worship was not restricted to one place. The prophet Isaiah had showed that the "**Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands.**" The heaven is His throne and the earth His footstool (Isaiah 66:1-2). No house can contain the glory of God and all the worship that may be offered to Him. The implication of Stephen was, that One had come who was greater than the temple in whom all worship should center regardless of place. That important condition is that we shall worship in spirit and in truth.

4. He told them plainly that they had the rebellious spirit of their fathers: "**Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: 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**" (7:51-52). If he had said that circumcision should be done away and they did not believe him, they were worse, for they were uncircumcised in heart and ears. Their fathers had persecuted the prophets who had foretold the coming of the "**Just One,**" Jesus Christ, and they had taken Him when He came and had become His betrayers and murderers.

When one is faithful to truth, as now, he meets with bitter antagonism. If Jeremiah had kept quiet he would not have been cast into the dungeon. If Daniel had yielded quietly he would not have been cast into the lion's den. If John the Baptist had kept quiet he would not have been cast into prison and beheaded. If John Know had kept quiet he would not have been sentenced to the galleys. If missionaries who have gone into hundreds of fields had kept quiet they might not have suffered loneliness and persecution and sometimes martyrdom. If we are faithful in opposing wickedness in its many places of power today we will meet with unpopularity and opposition.

"He has no enemies, you say:
My friend your boast is poor.
He who hath mingled in the fray
Of duty that the brave endure,
Must have made foes! If he has none,
Small is the work that he had done.
He has hit no traitor on the hip;
He has cast no cup from perjured lip;
He has never turned the wrong to right;
He has been a coward in the fight."

5. He told them that resisting the truth was resisting the Holy Spirit: "**Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye**" (7:51). Peter and John were Spirit-filled men. The church was a Spirit-filled church. Stephen was a Spirit-filled man. When they resisted the Gospel by any or all of these they were resisting the Holy Spirit. It may seem like an unimportant matter to accept or reject what a man says, but when that man is speaking the truth as it is in Christ Jesus it becomes an all-important matter to reject his message.

Moses said, after giving to law to Israel: “**I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live**” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Stephen had set before those who heard him, life through Jesus Christ, if they rejected His message they rejected Christ. Jesus told his disciples that those who received them received Him, and those who would not receive them were refusing to accept Him that sent them. This is a very important responsibility upon those who reject their invitation to believe in Christ.

HIS DEATH IS A TESTIMONY THAT AMIDST THE MOST TERRIBLE CONDITIONS THE CHRISTIAN MAY REMAIN CALM

When his persecutors accused Stephen they looked on him and saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. When they gnashed on him with their teeth he “**looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God**” (7:55-56). His was wonderful resignation. He, like Paul, knew whom he believed, and was persuaded that He was able to keep him in the midst of any trouble. Many times we have noted the difference between the believer and unbeliever when danger confronts them. Stephen may have been among those with Peter and John when they prayed for boldness as they were in danger of persecution. Of one thing we are sure, that God heard Stephen’s prayer and granted him boldness. He not only had boldness to testify, but boldness to endure when his persecutors set upon him in fury.

Many plots were made against the life of John G. Paton while he was working as a missionary upon the Island of Tanna. It is a present-day assurance that God will give strength in danger to note the manner he was protected and the unwavering faith which was given to him. In his autobiography he relates the following: One day “when Natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe: but a Kaserumini Chief snatched a spade with which I had been working, and dexterously defended me from instant death. Life in such circumstances led me to cling very near to the Lord Jesus; I knew not, for one brief hour, when or how attack might be made; and yet, with my trembling hand clasped in the hand once nailed on Calvary, and swaying the scepter of the Universe, calmness and peace and resignation abode in my soul.

“Next day, a wild Chief followed me about for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in His hands, and felt immortal till my work was done. Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each other’s heels. Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably.

“His words: ‘**I o, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world**’ (Matthew 28:20), became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene. I felt his supporting power, as did St. Paul, when he cried, ‘**I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.**’ It is a sober truth, and it comes to me sweetly after twenty years, that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smile of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club, axe or spear was being leveled at my life. Oh the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing ‘**him who is invisible!**’”

JESUS WILL NOT FORSAKE HIS DISCIPLES IN THE HOUR OF DEATH

The death of Stephen is a testimony that Jesus Christ will not forsake His disciples in the hour of death: “**But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God**” (7:55-56). He saw the heavens opened and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Jesus had gone to prepare a place for him. That place was prepared. It was made visible to Stephen ever before he crossed the border line from this world to the next.

More than that Jesus Himself was made visible to Stephen. He appeared standing at the right hand of God. This remarkable fact has been often noted by expositors of Scripture. Jesus is usually represented as sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus does sit at the right hand of God. His work of atonement is completed and from that He rests. But, as Dr. G.C. Morgan reminds us, Christ was a priest after the order of Melchizedek as well as after the order of Aaron.

- As Aaron’s Archetype He made atonement.
- As Melchizedek’s Archetype He was standing and ministering.

Melchizedek ministered to Abraham, the man of faith. Luke had told us that he was writing of what Jesus continued to do. Here Jesus is shown continuing to minister to one of His loved saints on earth. What more blessed assurance can the Christian have than to know that Jesus is ever ready to minister to His saints in every extremity, especially in the hour of death?

A NOBLE EXAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS

The death of Stephen furnishes a noble example of Christian forgiveness: “**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**” (7:60). He was dragged out of the city and stoned. The worst they could say of him was that he warned them of their sin against Christ. The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. This is the first time we hear of Saul. We do not like to think of Saul as a persecutor. More frequently we think of him as enduring persecution.

We can see the stern hand of Saul in dealing with Stephen. Saul, as we infer from events which followed, never forgot that scene. Though for a little while he continued to lead the persecution, he was kicking against the pricks, or the goads.

He was evidently being told by the Spirit of God that Stephen was right and he was wrong. How could a man die with the vision which Stephen saw, and the forgiving spirit which Stephen had, and an angelic face which shone above the stones without being a true child of God? The test of forgiveness of enemies when one is terribly wronged is one of the hardest tests of the Christian. Stephen cried with a loud voice, the howling mob could hear him cry: "**Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!**" What a blessed spirit in which to "**fall asleep!**"

Namuri, one of Mr. Paton's teachers on Tanna, had been attacked by a heathen priest. He escaped, though wounded, the first time, but he would not leave his place of duty. He was eager to bring even his enemies to a saving knowledge of Christ. But the priest, like the Sadducean mob of old, was rendered more jealous because of the growing interest in the Christian religion. "One morning, the same savage Priest sprang upon him with his great club and left him for dead, wounded and bleeding and unconscious . . . The Teacher, recovering a little, crawled to the Mission House, and reached it about midday in a dying condition. On seeing him, I ran to meet him, but he fell near the Teacher's house, saying: 'Missi, I am dying! They will kill you also. Escape for your life.' " He was resigned, bore his pain quietly and was constantly praying for his persecutors. He said: "O Lord Jesus, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. O God, bring all the Tannese to love and follow Jesus."

Would that we like Stephen and like Namuri were so filled with the spirit of forgiveness, that when tempted in great or small matters, we would pray for our enemies and forgive them from the heart! How much better testimony we would then bear to our loving and merciful Lord!

A GLORIOUS REWARD

The death of Stephen furnishes us with the assurance that the Christian who has expired is in a state of comfort, as we saw in 7:59-60 above. Jesus received his spirit. He fell asleep. What a striking contrast between the rage of the mob without and the quiet tranquility within! When we read, "**he fell asleep,**" it sounds like he was at home in the bosom of his family. He was at home with God, in a better home than he had ever known before. In one way that was a fearful hour, but as we look back upon it we do not see the stones flying and the martyr suffering. We see his face shine with a glory that is more than earthly and see him fall asleep in Jesus. The words on a Scottish tomb which Dr. Taylor deciphered return to our mind:

"I go to grave as to my bed,
Yet not there to remain;
A while for to repose therein
And then to rise again."

Stephen, like the thief upon the cross, had the assurance before his death that He would be, on that very day, with Christ in Paradise. His spirit was received into Heaven there to remain in glory in the presence of the Lord forever. Did Stephen make a mistake? Did he pay too great a price for that which he received? He, like Peter and the apostles rejoiced "**that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.**"

Our light affliction is but for a moment in comparison with the glorious reward which we are promised through all eternity. Stephen's work on earth was not a failure, as it may have seemed to him at that moment. God's Word does not return to Him void. It accomplishes that which He pleases. It prospers in the mind of the man where He has sent it. Saul was consenting to Stephen's death. He heard Stephen's memorable address. Saul seemed to be one of the hardest to influence with the Gospel. But apparently God used the message of Stephen that day as one of the means to win Saul to Christ. In our apparent defeat God brings victory. We cannot measure the result of our preaching. The most hardened of all the audience may be moved of God, transformed, renewed, and led to become a most effective missionary.

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5-6).

QUESTIONS **(Acts 6:9-15; 7:1-60)**

1. So far as the record goes, who was the first martyr of the apostolic church?
2. What were the characteristics of Stephen?
3. If a man is wise, honest, Spirit-filled and earnest is he likely to suffer opposition and persecution?
4. Why did the opponents of the Gospel become furious at this time?
5. Is that a characteristic of Satan and his followers?
6. What is indicated concerning Stephen's ability as an expounder of Scripture?
7. How did the ability of his opponents compare?
8. How do wicked men usually answer a capable expounder of Scripture?
9. What evil could Stephen's enemies find in him?
10. How did they attempt to condemn him?
11. What effect did this have upon the appearance of Stephen?
12. Give some of the points of Stephen's defense as he stood before the council?
13. What does Stephen's defense teach us concerning the possibility of being courageous and humble at the same time?
14. How does a true testimony usually affect wicked men?
15. When men resist the truth who do they resist? What did Stephen say?
16. What lesson is there in Stephen's calmness for us?
17. What lesson is there in Stephen's forgiveness?
18. What is the spirit which prompts mob action?
19. What was the attitude of Jesus as He looked on? What does this indicate concerning His interest? Concerning His Deity?
20. What is taught here concerning the state of the soul after death?

~ end of chapter 14~