

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 7****“THE DAY THEY KILLED THE PREACHER”**

The name "Stephen" is a most significant name in church history, for Stephen was the first Christian martyr. The account of his martyrdom is recorded in Acts chapter 7. Stephen's name means "Victor's Crown" and seems to be prophetic for he was the first to wear the martyr's crown.

We are introduced to Stephen in Chapter 6. He was the first mentioned in the list of deacons selected in the early church. He was not only a servant of the church but was quite a preacher as well. His sermon is recorded in Acts Chapter 7 which is the longest chapter in the New Testament.

The last time we saw Stephen he was being mistreated by the Jewish Religious Court (Acts 6:8-15) and we are told that in that hostile environment his face glowed like the face of an angel.

As Chapter 7 begins, that angel-faced deacon becomes a powerful preacher. His sermon is a classic. We could title his sermon, "Religious Rebels." God told Ezekiel, "*I send to you to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me.*" (Ezekiel 2:3) God said to Isaiah, "*I have nourished and brought up children and they have rebelled against me.*" (Isaiah 1:2) And now Stephen addresses these same people and reiterates their long history of rebellion. His sermon has three points:

I. THE REVIEW OF THEIR PAST REBELLION. Acts 7:1 - 50

The first 50 verses can be divided into two parts: The History of God's Faithfulness and secondly, The History of Israel's Unfaithfulness.

A. The History of God's Faithfulness. Acts 7:1 - 35**1. *The Promise of God.*** Verses 1 - 8**2. *The Providence of God.*** Verse 9 -10**3. *The Provision of God.*** Verses 11 - 35

- a. The provision of the leader Joseph.
- b. The provision of the leader Moses (whom they rejected, v.35)

4. *The Power of God.* Verse 36**5. *The Patience of God.*** Verses 38 - 53

B. The History of Israel's Failure.

1. **They failed to own the worker of God.** v.35 compare v.39 - "*thrust him from them.*"
2. **They failed to obey the Word of God.** vs.38, 39a - "*to whom our fathers would not obey.*"
3. **They failed to observe the worship of God.** vs. 40-43

II. THE REBUKE OF THEIR PRESENT REBELLION. Versus 5 1 - 5 3

Notice that when Stephen had his audience thoroughly captivated, perhaps even while they were agreeing with him, he plunged the Sword of the Spirit into their hearts, for verse 54 tells us that, "*when they heard these things, they were cut to the heart.*"

What things did they hear? Read verses 51 – 53.

Their present rebellion is seen in:

A. Their Rebellion In Resisting The Spirit Of God. Verse 51.

The dictionary defines "resist" as "*to withstand, to strive against, to oppose.*"

B. Their Rebellion In Rejecting The Son Of God. Verse 52.

C. Their Rebellion In Refusing The Scriptures. Verse 53.

What is God's estimate of rebellion? God said to Saul, "*Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.*" (I Samuel 15:23)

In Jeremiah 5:23 God said of Israel, "*This people has a revolting and a rebellious heart.*" And in verse 25 he adds, "*Your sins have withheld good things from you.*"

III. THE REACTION THAT PROVED REBELLION. Versus 54-60

A. Their Viciousness. Verse 54

Stephen had charged them with rebellion, treason, murder and law-breaking! Think of the Sanhedrin sitting and listening to charges of that nature leveled against their respectable, religious selves! They were the Supreme Court of Israel; they enjoyed immunity from prosecution by virtue of their religious rank. Who dared to accost them - they thought that they could do no wrong. Therefore, do you wonder that such a crowd "*gnashed on him with their teeth?*" (Verse 54)

B. Their Victim. Verses 55-56.

The outlook was bad for Stephen. Every face before him was a thunder cloud and every eye flashed with lightning. The outlook was bad, but the uplook was glorious! "*He being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and Saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.*"

Sometimes it requires a dark outlook to make us look up. In Hebrews 11:27 we are told that Moses *"Endured as seeing him who is invisible."* The same can be said for Stephen. He saw *"the glory of God"* and *"the son of God."* Therefore, seventy sets of Sanhedrin teeth held no terror for him.

C. Their Vengeance. Verses 57-60

This same council had passed sentence on our Savior and now they proceed to do away with Stephen. There was no formal charge laid against Stephen, no evidence weighed, no guilt announced and no sentence passed. At the announcement by Stephen of his vision, they became infuriated. The Council of Law and Order became a mob of unrestrained violent religious men. Dignity was thrown to the winds as the Rulers of Israel dragged this blessed saint out to the stoning ground and wreaked their vengeance upon him.

Notice Stephen's testimony even in death: *"And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."* (Acts 7:59-60)

CONCLUSION:

The motto of the French foreign Legion is:

"If I falter, push me on!
If I stumble, pick me up!
If I retreat, shoot me!"

If we were called upon to witness for Christ as did Stephen, would we retreat? Stephen testified as a Christian ought to testify. That was fearlessly, boldly, courageously and unflinchingly. Stephen died as a Christian ought to die: with a vision of heaven in his heart.

It has been said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. His death did not stop the growth of the young church, rather it spurred its growth.

What a wonderful spiritual ancestry we have! We are the spiritual progeny of stalwart saints who have gone on before. Let us not cower before a world that hates our Savior and, if we live spirit-filled lives, will hate us as well. Remember, we are not on a playground but a battleground. Therefore,

*"Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe;
Forward into battle see His banners go!"*

- Sabine Baring-Gould

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