

The Martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:51-60)

When the Hellenistic Jews drug Stephen before the Sanhedrin, he was falsely accused of blasphemy against both Moses and God (Acts 6:11). They hoped Stephen would defend himself poorly and be convicted of profaning the Lord and his servant, Moses. If this judgment was passed down, there was little the Sanhedrin could do to punish Stephen. They could bar him from the Temple and, perhaps, prohibit him from entering any synagogue. But a Sanhedrin-sanctioned execution for blasphemy was off the table. The Romans had taken away the right for the Jews to exercise capital punishment when Palestine was annexed by the Roman General Pompey in 63 BC. Therefore, when the Jewish leaders hatched their scheme against Stephen, it is unlikely that they planned Stephen's death by stoning. Likely, their goal was simply deal a damaging blow to the young Christian movement by denigrating one of her most prominent leaders in public.

However, Stephen did not crumble under pressure as they had hoped. Empowered by the Spirit, Stephen delivered one of the most powerful speeches in Christian history. And it was far from a defense against the charge of blasphemy; Stephen placed both the Sanhedrin and all those who supported their cause against Christ on trial. He demonstrated that it was they, not he, that were guilty of religious crimes against God, his servants, and his Law.

— Prayer —

Take a moment to pray for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who will be called upon to defend their faith this week. Pray that their hearts and minds would be prepared for the task, and thank the Spirit ahead of time that the words to say, and the victory to be had, belong to him!

Stephen's first charge against the unbelieving Jews—as we have discussed thoroughly in previous handouts—concerned their blasphemy against Yahweh in the form of misdirected reverence. Stephen makes a subtle argument through a recounting of the wilderness journey that the idolatry of the Israelites began with the creation and worship of the Golden Calf and had culminated in the creation and worship of the Jerusalem Temple. What was meant to be a place of worship had become the object of worship for many Jews. God was thought to be contained in and

constrained by the Temple, so that the Temple itself had become an idol to the people. It was not Stephen, then, who committed blasphemy against the Lord. The Sanhedrin—especially the Sadducees—and their supporters sacrilegiously exalted a thing “made by human hands” (Acts 7:41, 48) over the Creator.

The reader has been prepared for Stephen's second charge against his accusers since his recounting of the Joseph story (Acts 7:9-16). The accusation does not come to the fore, though, until the concluding words of his speech. Whereas the former charge was delivered in a slight, understated manner through the use of story, Scriptural citation, and repeated words, his second charge is delivered as subtly as brick to the face:

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (Acts 7:51-53).

Stephen directly accuses the wayward Jews of being just like the Israelites of both the wilderness journey and pre-Exile eras. Their stubbornness (“stiff-necked”) and unholiness (“uncircumcised of heart and ears”) have led them to reject the Spirit and his plans for salvation. They dismissed Jesus’ teaching and murdered him, just as their forefathers had done to the prophets of old like Jeremiah and Isaiah. Thereby, they have spurned both the God and the Law they thought they were obeying.

When the Sanhedrin and the crowd hear Stephen turn the tables on them, placing them on trial before the Lord, they lash out in anger and exact mob justice:

“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:54-60).

A typical Jewish stoning would entail the witnesses who testified against the convicted blasphemer taking the man outside the city, where he would be stripped of his cloak and thrown off a precipice of about 15 feet. The man would then be rolled over onto his back, and a large boulder would be pushed from the precipice onto his chest. Often, this would be enough to kill the blasphemer instantly. If this did not work, however, a second stone would be dropped directly onto the accused man’s head.

It does not appear that the mob, in their blinding anger, followed standard procedure. Rather than relieving Stephen of his cloak, in an ironic twist, they threw off their own cloaks, presumably because the heavy garments limited their range of motion. They cast them at the feet of one, Saul, a man whose life and mission will come to occupy the lion’s share of Luke’s narrative in Acts. Here, he is introduced in a most ignominious manner; he is an accomplice in and spectator of the murder of the first martyr in Christendom.

This impromptu form of stoning provided Stephen with the opportunity to speak to the crowd while being executed. Stephen mimics Jesus by citing the first line of Psalm 31:5—“Into your hand I commit my spirit”—implicitly identifying Jesus as the faithful and redeeming LORD of the poem. Psalm 31:5 was memorized by Jewish children and was prayed to God every night at bedtime. In the midst of such a brutal scene, Luke portrays Stephen’s death as serene, like a child softly speaking her nightly prayers to the Father before peacefully laying down her head. In childlike faith in the Lord’s protection and love, Stephen relinquished his spirit and “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60).

— Prayer —

Ask the Father to give all Christ-followers the same heart of love and understanding for their persecutors that Stephen displayed so very well.

There is no worry in Stephen’s voice, and there is no malice in his heart toward his executioners. He was never given a chance to call the crowd and their leaders to repentance. Upon saying that he glimpsed Jesus, the Danielic Son of Man (cf. Dan 7:13-14), standing to accuse the unbelieving Jews before the Father (Acts 7:55-56), the people closed their ears and rushed him. But his final words reveal that even though he was harsh with his hearers, he cared

deeply for them. He knew what they deserved for rejecting the Spirit and for killing him; he didn't want that sin to separate them irrevocably from the Father. And so, he made his last words a simple prayer on their behalf: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." We are made aware in Acts 9 that God accepted Stephen's graceful plea. It is there that Luke records the conversion of Saul to Christianity, the very man who stood by and gave hardy approval to the mob that took Stephen's life.

With the conclusion of Acts 7, Luke has describe the first martyrdom in Christian history. But Luke does not record the story simply because it is a "famous-first." Rather, he preserves the account of Stephen's death because it introduces a new era of salvation history. Now that Stephen has been executed for blasphemy, his fellow Hellenistic Jews residing in Jerusalem begin to experience persecution on a grand scale. Their response: they flee Jerusalem taking the gospel of the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ with them. In this way they begin to fulfill Jesus' prophecy of Acts 1:8:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Praise be to the Lord!