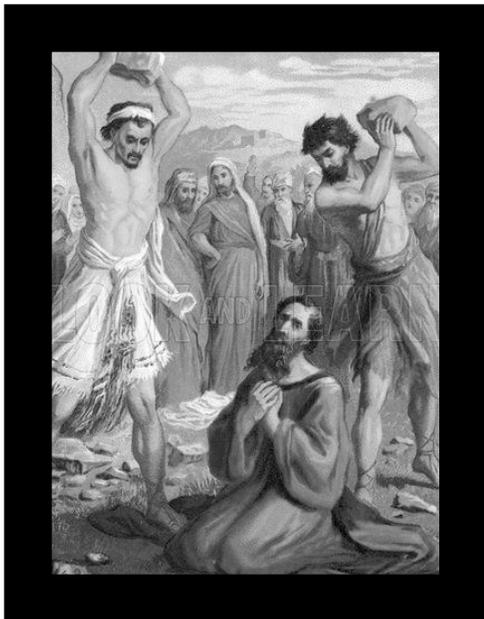


# The Acts of the Holy Spirit and the early church

## July 6, 2014, Stephen's message

### Part 15, the stoning of the great Deacon of God



#### **Acts 7:51-60 New International Version**

*“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”* When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

*57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

*59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

*60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

This violence presents a singular contrast to the general observance of the forms of a fair trial in our Lord's condemnation and fraudulent trial. We must remember however that at the time of Jesus's trial and death the Roman procurator was present in Jerusalem. Now all restraint was removed, and the heights of Jewish fanaticism had its full play.

You see, these dignitaries had never quite faced such a prisoner as Stephen. He spoke like a judge, not a prisoner. He seemed to be an accuser rather than the accused. And he hit the nail right on the head. He hit them right where they lived. And he was right on. And they didn't want anybody to expose and un-bare their sins.

And so they reacted as people living without God would live, they reacted quite literally, satanically! You'll remember that Herod killed John the Baptist because John pointed to Herod's sin and rebuked him for it.

### **Mark 6:17-18 New International Version**

*For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."*

We should remember that it was the Pharisees that nailed Jesus to a cross because He denounced and exposed their hypocrisy. Starting with Peter and John, we now see that the Jews reacted in the same manner toward the apostles. Stephen was only the first of multitudes of men who, in their unflinching exposure of the sins of others, have died for shedding the light of Christ in that most dark of all places, the sin within the hearts of men and women.

When you confront the world, you speak the truth. It's so easy to water down the message to the point where it's made into nothing. We need to speak the truth in season and out, and we see here that this great man Stephen spoke the truth. And Stephen received it appears a special, type of grace specifically for this occasion. Pastor and Teacher **Dr. John MacArthur** writes of this special type of Grace from God:

**You trust God for it. Stick your neck out. Be bold. Let the world hit back. And watch how God sustains you. I promise you He'll do it. So don't shirk the responsibility because you don't feel adequate. When you're in your worst mess, you're strong.**

Now we see that they had to kill Stephen. I mean, they either had to kill Stephen or admit that they were wrong in killing Jesus! Seriously, they were having quite the conniption fit simply because Stephen is making the same claim for Jesus that Jesus made for Himself months earlier:

### **Matthew 26:62-66 (NIV)**

*Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." "You have said so," Jesus replied.*

*"But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.*

And they killed Jesus for saying it, so if they're going to stay consistent, they've got to kill Stephen for saying it, too.

## **Screaming in rage and plugging their ears:**



Notice that they cried out with a loud voice to not only irritate and excite one another, but also to drown out the noise of their consciences. This was never more evident than when Stephen said that he actually saw Heaven opened, and that lunatic Jesus, of which they killed earlier for the crime of blasphemy, standing at the right hand of Yahweh. The noted theologian, **Matthew Henry** notes the following:

**It is very common for a righteous cause, particularly the righteous cause of Christ's religion, to be attempted to be run down by noise and clamor. What is wanting in reason is made up in tumult, and the cry of him that ruleth, among fools, while the words of the wise are heard in quiet.**

They just started screaming, you know, just yelling. They couldn't stand this. And they slammed their hands over their ears. That is not exactly open-mindedness, but at least they ((both the Jewish leaders and the people watching)) were in complete agreement on the penalty for Stephen. Often the leaders and the people were in strict opposition on many things, **but as the old 4th century BC proverbial writing on Sanskrit noted:**

### **The enemy, of my enemy, is my friend**

They didn't want God's truth, for the fact of the matter was that these Jewish leaders really never had wanted God's truth. They'd resisted the Holy Spirit all along, killed God's messengers, killed His Messiah, rejected His law, and for somebody like a man-servant such as Stephen was, to correct them in public was an offence to all who heard it.

Now there is some dispute as to just who was crying out and screaming at Stephen in rage, but the general consensus is that it was actually the witness's gathered around the Sanhedrin that started screaming and then running at Stephen. Now it appears that this lynch mob really wanted the sentence passed against Stephen by the Sanhedrin, but they waited and waited. ((this after all is our 15<sup>th</sup> week on this great message, they however did not have to wait that long))

Now the idea of stopping or covering up one's ears is rooted deep in Jewish tradition. The writings of some **ancient Jewish scholars** relate the following:

**If a man hears anything that is indecent, or not fit to be heard, let him put his fingers in his ears hence the whole ear is hard, and the tip of it soft, that when he hears anything that is not becoming, he may bend the tip of the ear within it.'**

Their stopping their ears was an example of a manifest specimen of their wilful obstinacy; Now these supposedly God fearing good Jewish people were resolved they would not hear what had a tendency to convince them, which was what the prophets often complained of, note the following that although written many years prior to the life of Stephen, fit's perfectly..

**Psalm 58:1-5 (NIV)**

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge people with equity? No, in your heart you devise injustice, and your hands mete out violence on the earth. Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies. Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears, that will not heed the tune of the charmer, however skillful the enchanter may be.*

**Dragging the guilty outside the city walls:**

Part of the reason for the relocation of the punishment is so that the sacred city of Jerusalem might not have to suffer the indecency of the blasphemer, even in his/her death.

**Leviticus 24:13-16 (NIV)**

*Then the Lord said to Moses: "**Take the blasphemer outside the camp.** All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him. Say to the Israelites: 'Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.'*

Now it was not usual, the Jewish writers inform us, to stone certain persons in the presence of the Sanhedrin. Though this was a popular tumult and Stephen was condemned without the regular process of trial, yet notice that some of the "forms" of law were observed, therefore he was physically removed from the city and he was stoned in the manner directed in the case of blasphemers. This is an excerpt from an old portion of the **Mishna, the Jewish written record of the oral traditions past down from generation to generation:**

**Judgment being finished, (or the trial over,) they brought him out (the person condemned) to stone him; the place of stoning was without the Sanhedrin, when he was ten cubits distant from the place of stoning, they order him to confess and when four cubits from it, they take off his garments--the place of stoning was twice a man's height."**

## The horrific death of stoning:

Stoning (also called lapidation) was a brutal and gruesome way to die. Depending on the method used, the criminal could die fairly quickly, but more often, it would take anywhere from 20 minutes to 2 hours to die. Obviously, this is much more like torture than a well-defined sentence carried out.

In early Bible History, stoning was the God-commanded Israelite method of executing those found guilty of the most serious offenses against His Law. The Bible does not describe in specifics which form of restraint was used while the very gory process of stoning was done, however some manner of keeping the condemned individual from running must have been used.

As documented by witnesses, and participants, over the centuries, these methods range from being thrown before the stoning from an elevation of some sort that caused incapacitating injury, to being tied to a post (or simply tied hand and foot), to being buried with just the head and shoulders left above ground, to just being surrounded by a large crowd of stone throwers in an enclosed area.

### **Deuteronomy 17:6-7 Amplified Bible**

*On the evidence of two or three witnesses he who is worthy of death shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from among you.*

Unlike most other forms of capital punishment, stoning had no specific single executioner, for God had said that "**All the congregation shall stone**" the convicted party. This was obviously done to impart the seriousness of the crime to the entire group. As opposed to how the mob killed Stephen, I thought it interesting to see just how the **Jewish Talmud** records that a properly convicted Jewish individual, was to be put to death. Now the **Talmud** limits the use of the death penalty to Jewish criminals who:

- (A) while about to do the crime were warned not to commit the crime while in the presence of two witnesses (and only individuals who meet a strict list of standards are considered acceptable witnesses);**
- (B) having been warned, committed the crime in front of the same two witnesses.**

In theory, the Talmudic method of how stoning is to be carried out differs from mob stoning of Stephen in our story today. According to the Jewish Oral Law, (The Mishna) after the Jewish criminal has been determined as guilty before the Great Sanhedrin,

### **#1. The place of stoning was twice a man's height (with rocks below).**

The two valid witnesses and the sentenced criminal go to the edge of a two story building. From there the two witnesses are to push the criminal off the roof of a two story building. The two-

story height is chosen as this height is estimated by the Talmud to effect a quick and painless demise but is not so high that the body will become dismembered.

**#2. One of the witnesses pushed him by the hips, [so that] he was overturned on his heart (fell face first on the rocks).**

**#3. He was then turned on his back.**

**#4. If that caused his death, he had fulfilled [his duty]; but if not, the second witness took a (large) stone and threw it on his chest.**

**#5. If he died thereby, he had done [his duty]; but if not, he [the criminal] was stoned by all Israel**

Let's take a look at the brief exchange between Jesus and a group of Pharisees that truly wanted to stone the Son of God:

### **John 10:17-33 New International Version**

*The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?” But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon.*

*Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*

*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” “We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”*

Under the type of law in the Muslim world that many today are worried about, called Sharia Law, which is the moral code and religious law of Islam. The Sharia law writes the following about the process for stoning people convicted of various crimes.

**The prisoner is buried either up to his waist (if male) or up to her shoulders (if female) and then pelted with stones by a crowd of volunteers until obviously battered to death.**

Under the terms of most fundamentalist courts of Islamist law, the stones must be small enough that death cannot reasonably be expected to result from only one or two blows, but large enough to cause physical harm. The average execution by stoning is extremely painful, lasting at least 10 to 20 minutes.

### **Father, forgive them:**

Here again we cannot help finding proof, not only that the mind of Stephen was after the mind of Christ, but that the narrative of the Crucifixion, as recorded by St. Luke, was, in some measure, known to him. The resemblance to the prayer of Christ, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” could hardly have been accidental.

Now it is true that the same Holy Spirit that resided in Jesus was also in Stephen, however since it was so short of a time since the death and resurrection of Jesus, that I believe that Stephen either was right there or was told about it later. A very interesting thought about having Saul there, cheering on if you will, the death of Stephen And Stephen’s last words in prayer of forgiveness, tie in as the words of **Augustine** wrote:

**We owe the conversion of Saul to the prayers of Stephen**

### **Falling asleep (in the arms of Christ):**

What a beautiful peace that comes about from that glorious phrase, he fell asleep! Now while the members of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish witnesses would spend the rest of their lives wondering about the words of Jesus & Stephen, he in gentleness and meekness just fell asleep and dare I say, awoke in the arms of His and Our Savior, Jesus.

#### **1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NIV)**

*For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Now we are speaking about the death that is but a sleep to people who know that Jesus is their Lord. This is not the sleep of the soul but rather the sleep of the physical body from all its grief’s and toils in life. Stephen died as much in a hurry as ever any man did, and yet, when he died, he fell asleep. He applied himself to his dying work with as much composure of mind as if he had been going to sleep; it was but closing his eyes, and dying. **The noted theologian, Matthew Henry writes the following:**

**He fell asleep when he was praying for his persecutors; it is expressed as if he thought he could not die in peace till he had done this. It contributes very much to our dying comfortably to die in charity with all men; we are then found of Christ in peace; let not the sun of life go down upon our wrath.**

This term of falling asleep is the usual mode of describing the death of saints in the Bible. It is an expression indicating:

- (1) The "peacefulness" of their death, compared with the alarm of sinners;**
- (2) The hope of a resurrection; as we retire to sleep with the hope of again awaking to the duties and enjoyments of life.**

## **In Closing:**

**Pastor John MacArthur of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA** writes the following about God's grace in our life at the most trying of all times:

**There is something that God does in, I believe, the willing death of a believer in the face of persecution, that grants to him the adequacy to die giving God the glory. And I think that's what God bestowed upon Stephen in a double sense. So I'm saying that to say this. Don't ever shirk from being bold in the world for fear that you don't have the resources to handle it.**

**It's at that point that God pours out a double portion of His Spirit to make it adequate. There's no death. It's simply going from one thing to the next. And as I've said many times before, if you're a Christian, the biggest change has already happened. Death isn't going to be as big a change as your salvation was. Think about that.**

Notice that it was the Jewish people that wanted death. But for Stephen it wasn't death. It was life as Jesus said:

### **John 11:25-26a Amplified Bible**

*Jesus said to her, I am Myself the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in adheres to, trusts in, and relies on Me, although he may die, yet he shall live; And whoever continues to live and believes in has faith in, cleaves to, and relies on Me shall never actually die at all.*

The great mind and heart of the man from New York, **Albert Barnes**, in his notes on the Bible writes the following, which if taken to heart, should truly give us peace in our final days:

**Oh how peaceful and calm is a death like that of Stephen, when compared with the alarms and anguish of a sinner! One moment of such peace in that trying time is better than all the pleasures and honors which the world can bestow. To obtain such peace then, the dying sinner would be willing to give all the wealth of the Indies, and all the crowns of the**

**earth. So may I die and so may all my readers - enabled, like this dying martyr, to commit my departing spirit to the sure keeping of the great Redeemer!**