

106 " ... full of faith and the Holy Spirit"

"Saint Stephen's Day" falls on December 26th each year. The attention of the Christian Church is thus abruptly switched for this one day from the joyful scenes in Bethlehem to the wicked scene in Jerusalem 33 years later - the occasion of Stephen's martyrdom.

We come across Stephen for the first time in Acts 6. He was one of the seven men chosen to serve as deacons within the new young church (6.5). But he seems to stand out from the others even at that early stage - he is mentioned first in the list, and is described as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost (A.V.)". Soon Stephen was in the thick of the action, being the God-used channel for "great wonders and miracles among the people" (verse 8).

And then - as so often happens when God's work is making fine progress - the opposition set to work (verses 9-15). Various Jewish factions falsely accused Stephen, though they had no answers to his replies (verse 10), and brought him before the council. Here was a re-run of all that had happened to the Lord Himself, in the same city, just a few months before. As Stephen stood before the council members, these angry, pompous leaders saw "his face as it had been the face of an angel" (verse 15) - a wonderful sign that Stephen was indeed full of the Holy Spirit in this hour of great danger.

His lengthy speech (7.2-53) is a brilliant, Holy-Spirit-filled description of the spiritual facts involving the Lord God and His chosen people the Jews. The pace hots up from verse 51: these are not words designed to endear Stephen to his listeners! - for he points out that they are "stiffnecked, uncircumcised resisting the Holy Ghostwhose fathers persecuted the prophets who were speaking beforehand of the Just One". These very council members have been the betrayers and murderers of the Just One, and breakers of the God-given law (verse 51 - 53).

No wonder they were "cut to the quick" and "gnashed their teeth on him" (verse 54) - for the truth can indeed hurt. Stephen is upheld to the last - being shown the glory of God and Jesus standing on his right hand. Not only does he see this wonderful sight - he tells them he sees it (vv 55-56), which turns out to be the proverbial "last straw" for his hearers: enough was enough.

Stephen committed his spirit into the hands of the Lord Jesus, and as the stones began to fly, he prayed that the Lord would forgive these murderers for this foul sin (vv 59-60).

What a remarkable man, and what a remarkable occasion. In the classic book "The Restored Vision", Arthur Ware points out (pages 510 - 511) that Stephen's address was actually God's last call to His people, the Jews, to accept His Son as their Messiah. Their reply to this call comes straight from the Parable of the Pounds: "But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19.14); this was the blunt reply conveyed by Stephen when he went to be with Christ. After Stephen's martyrdom the Jews were set aside by the Lord for the two-thousand-year duration of "the times of the Gentiles". Here was the judgement forewarned by the Lord Jesus in the Parable of the Fig Tree (Luke 13.6-9) - "If it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down". As Stephen went to be with the Lord, the divine axe was wielded on the fig tree of the Jewish nation.

There are many indications around us today that the age of the Gentiles is now over. The Lord's attention is turning once more to the Jews (Romans Chapters 9 -11) - in His deep mercy He has unfinished business with His chosen people!

And for us, Gentile accepters by God's grace of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, let us ponder the example of Stephen: an ordinary disciple like us, yet filled with faith, the Holy Ghost, wisdom and power - to such great effect.

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