

Eternity Daily Bible Study - No. 381
Series: The Primal Church - Acts Chapters 1-8
Verses: Acts 7:51-60
Topic: Stephen's Sermon Part 6 – Stephen Is Martyred
Date: 15th December 2004

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Acts 7:51-60 MKJV O stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so you do. (52) Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you have now been the betrayers and murderers; (53) who received the Law through disposition of angels, and did not keep it. (54) And hearing these things, they were cut to their hearts. And they gnashed on him with their teeth. (55) But being full of the Holy Spirit, looking up intently into Heaven, he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. (56) And he said, Behold, I see Heaven opened and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. (57) And crying out with a loud voice, they stopped their ears and ran on him with one accord. (58) And throwing him outside the city, they stoned him. And the witnesses laid their clothes down at the feet of a young man named Saul. (59) And they stoned Stephen, who was calling on God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. (60) And kneeling down, he cried with a loud voice, Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

In his sermon Stephen has listed the ways the Jewish people has resisted God's voice and rejected first Joseph, then Moses, then all of the prophets. To top this off they betrayed and murdered their Messiah, Jesus Christ. They were those who received the Law through angels – but did not keep it.

This disobedience is described as being due to the state of their hearts, and of their ears: "O stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!" Thus it is extremely important to listen carefully to God with our ears and to obey Him in our hearts which is why Jesus told the parable of the Sower and the four soils and said: "Luke 8:18 MKJV Therefore be careful how you hear. For whoever has, to him shall be given; and whoever has not, from him shall be taken even that which he seems to have." In other words careful listening will build up our spiritual inheritance, while careless listening will make us more and more dull, so that we lose out in the end.

Being told that they always resisted God profoundly annoyed the Sanhedrin and they "gnashed their teeth at him" but the statement that tipped them over the edge and got Stephen killed, rather than just beaten or imprisoned was this: "Behold, I see Heaven opened and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God."

If Jesus was at the right hand of God, then the prophecy of Psalm 110 had been fulfilled and this meant that the priesthood had gone from the Aaronic priesthood of Moses back to the priesthood of Melchizedek of the time of Abraham. If Jesus was at the right hand of God, then the Old Covenant was obsolete, and a new and better

way to God had been inaugurated by faith. This change of system was very threatening to those who were so heavily invested in it.

Here is Psalm 110 in its entirety:

Psalms 110:1-7 MKJV A Psalm of David. Jehovah said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand until I place Your enemies as Your footstool. (2) Jehovah shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion; rule in the midst of Your enemies. (3) Your people shall be willing in the day of Your power, in holy adornment from the womb of the morning: You have the dew of Your youth. (4) Jehovah has sworn, and will not repent, You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (5) The Lord at Your right hand shall strike through kings in the day of His wrath. (6) He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill them with dead bodies; He shall shatter heads over much of the earth. (7) He shall drink of the brook in the way; therefore He shall lift up the head.

Psalm 110 was a key Psalm for the early Christians and this is what James Fausset Brown has to say about it: "The explicit application of this Psalm to our Saviour, by Him (Matthew 22:42-45) and by the apostles (Acts 2:34; 1Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 1:13), and their frequent reference to its language and purport (Ephesians 1:20-22; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 10:12-13), leave no doubt of its purely prophetic character. Not only was there nothing in the position or character, personal or official, of David or any other descendant, to justify a reference to either, but utter severance from the royal office of all priestly functions (so clearly assigned the subject of this Psalm) positively forbids such a reference. The Psalm celebrates the exaltation of Christ to the throne of an eternal and increasing kingdom, and a perpetual priesthood (Zechariah 6:13), involving the subjugation of His enemies and the multiplication of His subjects, and rendered infallibly certain by the word and oath of Almighty God. (Psalm 110:1-7)" It is so full of theology that Matthew Henry calls it David's Creed. According to Gill the Jewish commentators prior to Christ viewed this as a conversation between God and His Word: "Galatinus (q) says the true Targum of Jonathan has it, "the Lord said to his Word;"

So Stephen was saying – you continually resisted the Holy Spirit, so God has made Jesus the Messiah and replaced the Temple and the Law with Abrahamic faith and the priesthood of Melchizedek. Not only that but you are guilty of the murder of the Just One.

"And crying out with a loud voice, they stopped their ears and ran on him with one accord." - They "stopped their ears" – to avoid hearing the Truth, rushed upon him as a mob and stoned Stephen to death. This was an illegal action without Roman approval, which it seems was needed for any execution (John 18:31).

"And throwing him outside the city, they stoned him. And the witnesses laid their clothes down at the feet of a young man named Saul." This incident would haunt Saul, who would become Paul the apostle, for the rest of his life. Yet Stephen's statement about actually seeing heaven opened and Christ at the right hand of God, may have helped Paul later on as he developed his theology of the ascended Christ.

It seems to have been a disorganized stoning and a slow death. A “proper stoning” uses a large boulder first of all to crush the chest of the victim and is a relatively quick death. By contrast this seems to have been a mad pelting with rocks until Stephen collapsed, and fell on his knees. As Stephen dies he asks the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit – and since in Jewish thought only God can receive someone’s spirit, it is a demonstration that Stephen, seeing heaven opened believed came to the clear belief that Jesus was God.

Stephen then follows the example of Jesus in asking God to not hold the sin of his executioners against them: “And kneeling down, he cried with a loud voice, Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” In this litigious age, it is a clear lesson for many Christians. We are not to be people of revenge. (Romans 12:19)

In a way Stephen did get revenge – by dying in such an innocent way, he made clear to all what he had said earlier about the hard-hearted guilt of the Sanhedrin.

Blessings,

John Edmiston

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