

STEPHEN'S DEFENCE AND MARTYRDOM

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-60.

LESSON 289 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"
(II Timothy 3:12)

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 6:8-15

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called *the synagogue* of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

¹¹ Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and *against* God.

¹² And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon *him*, and caught him, and brought *him* to the council,

¹³ And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

¹⁴ For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

¹⁵ And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Acts 7:1-60

¹ Then said the high priest, Are these things so?

² And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in

BIBLE REFERENCES:

I Called and Chosen

1. Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Ghost, performed many miracles and wonders, Acts 6:8;

Acts 2:17-18

¹⁷ And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

¹⁸ And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

Acts 4:29-31

²⁹ And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word,

³⁰ By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus.

³¹ And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

Acts 8:5-8

⁵ Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.

⁶ And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.

⁷ For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed *with them*: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

⁸ And there was great joy in that city.

II Persecutions

1. Stephen's ministry aroused great antagonism, Acts 6:9-15;

Acts 24:5-9

⁵ For we have found this man *a pestilent fellow*, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes:

⁶ Who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law.

⁷ But the chief captain Lysias came *upon us*, and with great violence took *him* away out of our hands,

⁸ Commanding his accusers to come unto thee: by examining of whom thyself mayest take knowledge of all these things, whereof we accuse him.

⁹ And the Jews also assented, saying that these things were so.

Acts 25:7

⁷ And when he was come, the Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove.

Mark 14:55-59

⁵⁵ And the chief priests and all the council sought for witness against Jesus to put him to death; and found none.

⁵⁶ For many bare false witness against him, but their witness agreed not together.

⁵⁷ And there arose certain, and bare false witness against him, saying,

⁵⁸ We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.

⁵⁹ But neither so did their witness agree together.

Charran,

³ And said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.

⁴ Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell.

⁵ And he gave him none inheritance in it, no, not *so much as* to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when *as yet* he had no child.

⁶ And God spake on this wise, That his seed should sojourn in a strange land; and that they should bring them into bondage, and entreat *them* evil four hundred years.

⁷ And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.

⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so *Abraham* begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac *begat* Jacob; and Jacob *begat* the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,

¹⁰ And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house.

¹¹ Now there came a dearth over all the land of Egypt and Chanaan, and great affliction: and our fathers found no sustenance.

¹² But when Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first.

III Stephen's Defence

1. Stephen confuted his enemies by his defence from the Scripture, Acts 7:1-53;

Acts 2:14-36

¹⁴ But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all *ye* that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:

¹⁵ For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is *but* the third hour of the day.

¹⁶ But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

¹⁷ And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

¹⁸ And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

¹⁹ And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:

²⁰ The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come:

²¹ And it shall come to pass, *that* whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

²² Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:

²³ Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:

²⁴ Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

²⁵ For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved:

²⁶ Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope:

²⁷ Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

²⁸ Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance.

²⁹ Men *and* brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day.

³⁰ Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;

³¹ He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.

³² This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

³³ Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

³⁴ For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,

³⁵ Until I make thy foes thy footstool.

³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.

Acts 17:22-32

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, *Ye* men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

²³ For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an

¹³ And at the second *time* Joseph was made known to his brethren; and Joseph's kindred was made known unto Pharaoh.

¹⁴ Then sent Joseph, and called his father Jacob to *him*, and all his kindred, threescore and fifteen souls.

¹⁵ So Jacob went down into Egypt, and died, he, and our fathers,

¹⁶ And were carried over into Sychem, and laid in the sepulchre that Abraham bought for a sum of money of the sons of Emmor *the father* of Sychem.

¹⁷ But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt,

¹⁸ Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph.

¹⁹ The same dealt subtilly with our kindred, and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.

²⁰ In which time Moses was born, and was exceeding fair, and nourished up in his father's house three months:

²¹ And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up, and nourished him for her own son.

²² And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.

²³ And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel.

²⁴ And seeing one *of them* suffer wrong, he defended *him*, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian:

²⁵ For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not.

²⁶ And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one

altar with this inscription, **TO THE UNKNOWN GOD**. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

²⁴ God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

²⁶ And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

²⁷ That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

²⁸ For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

²⁹ Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

³⁰ And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

³¹ Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that man* whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this *matter*.

Acts 24:25

²⁵ And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.

Acts 26:28

²⁸ Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Luke 21:12-15

¹² But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute *you*, delivering *you* up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake.

¹³ And it shall turn to you for a testimony.

¹⁴ Settle *it* therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer:

¹⁵ For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.

2. Stephen, in his hour of trial, was encouraged and strengthened by a vision of Christ, Acts 7:55, 56;

Revelation 1:10-16

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,

¹¹ Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send *it* unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

¹² And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

¹³ And in the midst of the seven candlesticks *one* like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

¹⁴ His head and *his* hairs *were* white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes *were* as a flame of fire;

¹⁵ And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.

¹⁶ And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance *was* as the sun shineth in his strength.

2 Corinthians 12:1

again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another?

²⁷ But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?

²⁸ Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday?

²⁹ Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons.

³⁰ And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush.

³¹ When Moses saw *it*, he wondered at the sight: and as he drew near to behold *it*, the voice of the Lord came unto him,

³² *Saying, I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.* Then Moses trembled, and durst not behold.

³³ Then said the Lord to him, Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.

³⁴ I have seen, I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt, and I have heard their groaning, and am come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send thee into Egypt.

³⁵ This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send *to be* a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush.

³⁶ He brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years.

³⁷ This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your

¹ **It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.**

IV Martyrdom

1. Haters of God killed Stephen in satanically provoked anger, Acts 7:54-60;

Acts 12:2

² **And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.**

Revelation 6:9

⁹ **And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:**

Revelation 20:4

⁴ **And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received *his* mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.**

Revelation 11:9

⁹ **And they of the people and kindreds and tongues and nations shall see their dead bodies three days and an half, and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves.**

Revelation 11:10

¹⁰ **And they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.**

2. Stephen followed his Master's example by praying for his enemies, Acts 7:59, 60;

Luke 23:34

³⁴ **Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.**

Isaiah 53:7

⁷ **He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.**

NOTES:

Righteous Testimony

Both sacred history and the Bible inform us that persecutions and bloodshed continued for the Church after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The persistent preaching of the disciples that Jesus was the Christ of God stirred up new violence against them. Stephen, who had been chosen as one of the first deacons of the Church, became the first casualty of the Church Militant. Stephen had performed great miracles and wonders among the people, but his success caused some Judaizers to seek him out to vent their hatred of God upon him as a follower of Christ.

Unable to find any fault with Stephen, these enemies of God fell back on the old Pharisaical stratagem of false witnesses and false accusations. It is obvious they were of the same mind and fellowship as those in Jerusalem who had crucified the Lord, for they did not hesitate to follow such a pattern themselves.

Not being able to resist the spirit and wisdom by which Stephen spoke, the accusers took Stephen before the council. Stephen had to defend himself without the aid of friends or council, but he was not actually alone. Jesus, prior to His death, had instructed His disciples regarding these coming persecutions and had advised them what to do. A part of those instructions was: "They shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. . . . Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall

brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.

³⁸ This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:

³⁹ To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust *him* from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,

⁴⁰ Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for *as for* this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.

⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

⁴² Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices *by the space of* forty years in the wilderness?

⁴³ Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which ye made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.

⁴⁴ Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen.

⁴⁵ Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drave out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David;

⁴⁶ Who found favour before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob.

⁴⁷ But Solomon built him an house.

⁴⁸ Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

answer: for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist" (Luke 21:12-15). How mightily did Jesus carry out this promise in Stephen's behalf as he made his defence before these cruel enemies of God!

The Scripture says that Jesus "before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession" (I Timothy 6:13), and God enabled Stephen to do the same. All those who sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

Stephen's Defence

Stephen's defence before the council is a sermon, which all Christians would do well to read often. Stephen evidently had a great understanding of God's plan for Israel, and he seems to have been well educated in the Scriptures. Although his accusers were men who prided themselves on the keeping of the law of God, Stephen so ably expounded the Scripture to them that he convicted them of being derelict in their duties and obligations to God and His law. Stephen brought an indictment against all Israel for their crimes of many generations, climaxed with their crucifixion of Christ, which was the most monstrous evil act ever perpetrated. Through the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Ghost, Stephen emphasized their individual guilt by this indictment of their crimes. The tables were turned on Stephen's accusers, and they found themselves accused before God.

This being more than the accusers could endure, they rushed upon Stephen to stone him to death; whereupon God granted to His noble saint a glimpse into Heaven that possibly has never been granted to a mortal soul before or since. Looking up steadfastly into Heaven, Stephen saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God — an exceptional and remarkable vision! The Scriptures record no other instance of Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

As a co-ruler and an equal with God the Father, Jesus would be **sitting** on the right hand of God, even as He told the high priest He would be. (**Matthew 26:64** ⁶⁴ **Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.**) Majesty **sits** enthroned while all others stand before Him to pay worship and homage. The implication in this passage of Scripture is that Jesus was standing in respect and honour to this saint of God who was valiantly defending the truth in the face of these God-haters and who was about to lose his life for his testimony.

Stephen's death and martyrdom caused a great stir in the early Church. The fortitude of Stephen, coupled with his unwavering faith in Christ, also left its influence on a man called Saul of Tarsus. Saul was consenting to Stephen's death, and seems to have been one of the chief agitators of the crowd, which stoned Stephen. The ability of Stephen to pray for those who were taking his life seemed to inflame Saul's hatred against the disciples of Jesus even more. He was soon to instigate still more persecutions against the Christians, but, finally, become converted to the faith of Christ.

As we think of Stephen in this trying hour, we are reminded of the prayer of the Psalmist: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me: thou shalt stretch forth thine hand against the wrath of mine enemies, and thy right hand shall save me. The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O LORD, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands" (Psalm 138:7, 8). We know that God did not forsake this saint of God.

Blood of the Saints

Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian dispensation. He

as saith the prophet,
⁴⁹ Heaven *is* my throne, and earth
is my footstool: what house will ye
build me? saith the Lord: or what
is the place of my rest?

⁵⁰ Hath not my hand made all
these things?

⁵¹ Ye stiffnecked and
uncircumcised in heart and ears,
ye do always resist the Holy
Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do*
ye.

⁵² Which of the prophets have not
your fathers persecuted? and they
have slain them which shewed
before of the coming of the Just
One; of whom ye have been now
the betrayers and murderers:

⁵³ Who have received the law by
the disposition of angels, and have
not kept *it*.

⁵⁴ When they heard these things,
they were cut to the heart, and
they gnashed on him with *their*
teeth.

⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy
Ghost, looked up stedfastly into
heaven, and saw the glory of God,
and Jesus standing on the right
hand of God,

⁵⁶ And said, Behold, I see the
heavens opened, and the Son of
man standing on the right hand of
God.

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud
voice, and stopped their ears, and
ran upon him with one accord,

⁵⁸ And cast *him* out of the city, and
stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid
down their clothes at a young
man's feet, whose name was Saul.

⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen, calling
upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus,
receive my spirit.

⁶⁰ And he kneeled down, and cried
with a loud voice, Lord, lay not
this sin to their charge. And when
he had said this, he fell asleep.

joined the ranks of those faithful ones of all ages who have dared to give their testimonies to a God-hating and a Christ-rejecting world at the cost of their earthly lives. The men who rose up with satanic anger to murder Stephen were not the first to use such methods. Satan has been a murderer from the beginning, and he does not hesitate to attempt to murder those who oppose him today.

In the very first family upon earth, Cain, full of jealous hatred toward Abel, his own brother, slew him, because Abel was accepted of God and he was not. Cain thought he would silence forever the voice of God that spoke to him of his wrongdoing, by killing his brother. Abel was the example of God's righteousness, so far as Cain was concerned; and Cain thought that by getting rid of Abel he would be rid of a guilty conscience.

"Out of sight, out of mind" is an old principle with men, but God is not so easily put out of mind. Cain had no sooner killed his brother than he heard the voice of God questioning in an even louder tone, "Where is Abel thy brother?" Cain discovered that one cannot hide from an evil conscience nor from the all-seeing eye of God. The Psalmist aptly expressed this thought many generations later: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: . . . If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee" (Psalm 139:7-12).

The unconfessed sins of ages past, and the guilt of bloodstained hands of all murderers of all generations, will not remain hidden behind the martyr graves of those great men and women who have dared to preach the truth of God. When men rise up in hellish fury against the saints of God, they need to remember that they also rise up against God's own Son. Jesus said: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. . . . If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sins. He that hateth me hateth my father also" (John 15:18, 22, 23).

The Bible tells us that the saint of God bears the image of Christ. (**Ephesians 4:24** ²⁴ **And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Colossians 3:10** ¹⁰ **And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him**) Hoping to blot out all remembrance and sight of that hated image of the righteous Christ — as they see it in the life of the saints of God — the wicked seek to destroy the saints, only to discover by their guilty consciences that they are then more condemned than before.

Cup of Iniquity

At the proper time God will present to a Christ-rejecting world, full, final, and irrefutable evidence of their crimes and murders. This evidence will be the final proof of man's innate sinfulness and complete depravity without Christ. Perhaps this is part of the reason God permits His saints to be martyred. Jesus told some persecutors in His day: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son

of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar” (Matthew 23:33-35).

Stephen did not hesitate to preach Christ, righteousness, and salvation from sin. The Christ-haters, stung to fury because they could not refute Stephen’s accusations and denunciations of their evil deeds, killed him to silence him. Stephen did not go unavenged long, because the judgment of God began to fall upon the Jews of that generation with terrible fury. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies marked the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jesus concerning the judgment to come. That judgment has fallen with terrible exactness and fury upon the Jews until this very day. Yet it has not reached its climax, and will not until the time of the Great Tribulation, because of the continuous rejection of Jesus Christ as their Messiah and coming King.

Even in our present day we see in other countries the cruel persecutions of all who profess Christianity. It is estimated that more people have been slaughtered in recent years because of their belief in Christianity than in all other ages. Millions have been killed in recent years in China and Korea alone. The day of martyrdom is not yet past, and the saints of God must be ever ready to seal their testimony with their blood, if need be. Jesus said: “The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). He also said, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Jesus said that whosoever would lose his life for His sake and the Gospel’s would actually save his life. Stephen lost his earthly life by his persistent preaching of the Gospel, but he found eternal life instead. At the hour of great need he was able to see directly into Heaven itself, and then was ushered into the very presence of God. The promise of God to all is that though we lose our life for the Gospel’s sake we shall find it. Ours will be that life which has no end.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did men hate Stephen?
2. Who helped Stephen in his trial?
3. How did it happen that Stephen’s accusers became accused themselves before God?
4. Why did God grant Stephen a vision of the glorified Christ during the trial?
5. Why did the men who listened to Stephen kill him?
6. Why do wicked men desire to kill Christians?
7. Why are people martyred in this present generation?