

## Acts 6:8-8:1

This section of Acts is a lengthy record of the first martyr for the Faith. Our loyalty to Christ should be so great that we would be willing to die rather than to deny Him. The suffering church at Smyrna was urged, "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). These instructions are a call to martyrdom, if need be.

Stephen is the first, but there will be others who die for the Faith, but accounts of their deaths is greatly abbreviated. Stephen first appears in the text when he and six others were chosen by the multitude to solve the problem concerning neglected Grecian widows. The last time a number is given of the disciples is Acts 4:4, where it is said, "and the number of men came to be about 5,000." Sometimes the word "men," may be understood generically which includes both male and female, but that is the word "anthropos." The word "man" in Acts 4:4 is "aner" and never refers to woman. So the number of disciples in Jerusalem was likely well over 10,000 at this time.

Since only seven men were to be chosen, the numbering of Stephen among these reflects the high regard that his brethren had for him. Still, his serving tables did not prevent him from teaching. He powerfully taught the gospel, working signs among the people to confirm his message (Acts 6:8, 10). He disputed in the "synagogue of the Libertines (Freedmen)" and was more than a match for them (Acts 6:9f). Because some were blinded as Isaiah had predicted, they devised ways to get rid of Stephen and suborned men who were willing to give false testimony against him. "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God," they said (Acts 6:11). Stephen was seized, brought before the council, and chapter seven is the record of his defense. In addition to charges of blasphemy, false witnesses declared, "This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered unto us" (Acts 6:13f).

Stephen well knew that charges of blasphemy, if proven, were punishable by death. He knew his life was at stake and he moved slowly and methodically toward his final charge: "Ye do always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). He briefly summarizes the origin and rise of his nation beginning with the call of Abraham from Ur of Chaldee. He passes from Abraham to Isaac, to Jacob and then to Jacob's

twelve sons. He tells of Joseph's trials in Egypt and his triumphant rise to be second in Egypt. He tells how Abraham's seed went into Egypt and for a long while prospered. Their fortunes turned when there was a change in the dynasty which ruled Egypt, for there arose another king which "knew not Joseph." Egyptians mistreated and enslaved the Hebrews. During this time, Moses was born.

God had told Abraham his seed would be in bondage in a foreign land, but that He would deliver them from bondage executing vengeance upon their former oppressors. God chose Moses to be that deliverer, and although the account of Exodus does not say Moses intended to lead the people to freedom when he killed the Egyptian at age 40, the Hebrew writer agrees that Moses was acting by faith even then for he wrote: "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season:" (Heb. 11:24f). Israel, however, rejected Moses as their leader, refusing to follow him when he offered them deliverance saying to him, "Man, who made you a ruler and judge over us?" (Acts 7:27). Forty years later God was ready to deliver Israel from Egypt, although not by warfare. Moses is selected to be that deliverer, although a reluctant one.

Israel was not an easy people to lead. Again and again they rebelled against Moses' leadership and thousands died as a consequence. Still those who rebelled, rebelled against God. Stephen reminds them that they would not be obedient to Moses, but turned back in their hearts to Egypt (Acts 7:39). They rejected God by making a golden calf to worship (7:41). They carried their gods into Canaan that they had worshipped in Egypt (7:43).

Still, God provided and delivered them. He gave the pattern for the tabernacle and allowed Solomon to build a temple for him that He might be magnified and glorified among them (Acts 7:44, 47). God had spoken unto his people through Moses and His prophets. Did Israel obey these voices from God? They did not. Their fathers had rejected God's messengers as they were rejecting His messengers in Stephen's day.

Moses had predicted the coming of one like him (Acts 7:37). That one had come, approved by God through his signs and wonders just as he had confirmed Moses among their fathers. That prophet was Jesus. But the Jews of Stephen's day had killed that prophet, showing the same rebellious spirit that Israel had reflected through the years. Stephen expected no different actions from those who were trying him and he

charges: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed them that showed before of the coming of the Righteous One; of whom ye have now become betrayers and murderers; ye who received the law as it was ordained by angels, and kept it not" (Acts 7:151-53). Stephen's words were piercing ones and cut these people to the heart. They were so angry that they acted as wild beasts. They gnashed on him with their teeth.

Stephen was not deserted in his hour of trial. As his enemies were acting as wolves, he looked steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God. He saw Jesus standing at God's right hand; evidence of God's concern for this bold servant of His who was about to lose his life.

The trial was in shambles and over. Stephen's judges and accusers have heard more than they want to. They put their hands on their ears to silence any more of his soul-piercing words. They rush on him, take him outside the city, and stone him to death. But Stephen lost neither his composure nor serenity. He knelt down and prayed for his enemies just as his Master had done and as his life was ebbing away, said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and so he fell asleep.

Standing by, holding the coats of the witnesses who stoned Stephen was a young man who also was greatly stirred and provoked by the words he heard. His name was Saul, and Stephen's death was his taste of blood that caused him to relentlessly rage against all who were disciples of (as he regarded him) the accursed Jesus.

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