

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

Evangelist W. Paul Redmond Sr.

Volume 10, Issue 9

February 2014

What Are You Complaining About? (Part 8)

Exodus 16:7-12; Philippians 2:14

Last month we closed out with a brief mention about *The Initial Assault* upon Stephen. The men had tried to stop Stephen verbally but could not. As they heard Stephen describe the history of the nation of Israel and the nation's constant rejection of God's Word and His men, I wonder what was going through their mind. These were men that knew the history of the nation. I doubt they would have justified what their forefathers had done. Perhaps they acknowledged the wrongdoing of their forefathers and said that they would not have done the same thing. However, as Stephen vividly points out in Acts 7:51-53, they had done the same thing to Jesus and are doing it now to him. This was more than they could take.

Acts 7:54 says, "*When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.*" Their reaction is beyond anything that I can imagine. It is evidence of the natural man's utter hatred of being confronted with their sin. Episodes similar to this are recorded many times throughout the book of Acts. When men reject the Gospel, they take out their anger on the one proclaiming the truth.

Think for just a moment what Stephen endured during this initial assault. The word gnashed means "to grind or grate the teeth." Some commentators say that the men were simply grinding their teeth "at" Stephen as a pack of dogs or wolves would do. But I think they did just what the verse says—"they gnashed on him." Most, if not all, of the Jews in this verse, are members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. They are highly educated, respectable members of the community. They are extremely religious men. Yet they hate Jesus, and the message of Jesus that Stephen has been proclaiming, so much

-2-

that they turn into a pack of wolves and begin to tear at his flesh. The pain must have intense, yet there is no complaining from Stephen. He has been faithful in everything, but his message is rejected. And still there is no complaining. So often, little things come in our lives (we must be honest; what we face is nothing like what Stephen is facing here) and our first response is complaining. May we learn to respond as Stephen did—with no complaining.

You would think that Stephen would complain a little or at least would be begging them to stop. But nothing like that comes out of his mouth. Instead, he says, "*Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God*" (7:56). What a marvelous truth is revealed here! Several other times in the New Testament Jesus is mentioned as being on the right hand of God, but in every other instance Jesus is seated because His work of salvation is done. It stands in great contrast to the Old Testament priest who had no seat in the Tabernacle or Temple because he always had another sacrifice to perform. But here Jesus is standing to receive His servant. When Stephen tells them what he sees, they are enraged even more.

Verse 54 describes these men who reject the Gospel as wild animals. In verse 57, they begin to act as spoiled children. The verse says, "*Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord.*" As I read the verse, I can imagine that they are trying to drown out what Stephen is saying by making a lot of noise. Perhaps it is total hatred and disgust for what he says, but whatever the reason, they utterly despise the thought that Jesus is at the right hand of God. Many of them had been the very ones who rejected Jesus and crucified Him just as Stephen had said back in verse 52. To think that this One whom they crucified is now in Heaven with God is utterly reprehensible to them. They will not hear it and try to drown out what Stephen is saying.

They also "*stopped their ears*"—just what a spoiled child would do when he does not want to hear what his parents or his authority is

telling him. The message should have been well received. There are no greater words in all of Scripture than what Stephen has said in Acts 7:56. These religious men should have stopped in their tracks and fallen down on their face before Jesus. They should have then realized, even after rejecting everything that Stephen had said so far, that Stephen was right and Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. But the One that Stephen saw was the One they rejected. It did not bring joy to their hearts. Instead it angered them even more. If they truly were going to listen to Stephen and make a decision after some rational thought, they were well beyond that. They were intent on stopping the preaching of Stephen. They could not stop him through threats or trial. They could not stop him by trying to drown him out with noise or by stopping their ears. They could still hear him through stopped ears. There was only one way to stop him. They would kill him.

The end of verse 57 and the beginning of verse 58 describe *The Intense Assault*. Those verses say, “[They] ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him.” This was totally contrary to Jewish law. The reason for trials was so mobs would not put people to death without proper conviction and sentencing. The very men who were to make sure that this was carried out properly, are now the ones putting a man to death without sentencing him.

It was also contrary to Roman law. These same men in John 18:31 say, “*It is not lawful for us to put any man to death.*” Only a few months at most had passed since the trial of Jesus. I doubt the Romans had changed their view on capital punishment this soon. But these men are so enraged at Stephen that they do not care about the Roman law at this time. They despise Stephen and his message so much that they can think of nothing but killing him.

It is amazing as we read this passage about Stephen and notice the reaction of these men to Stephen’s message. Time and time again we notice how angry they get when Stephen proclaims the truth of the Gospel. It begins with them disputing and lying about him. No

doubt these men who did such were normally moral and upright in the natural sense. If you had just talked to them about the issues of life they would have responded very well. But Stephen confronted them with the Gospel. When he told them plainly that they were spiritually uncircumcised, they were enraged. Their hatred of the truth led them to violate their own law in several ways and then kill Stephen.

While facing nothing like what Stephen did, I have noticed similar reactions when trying to proclaim the Gospel from door to door. Sometimes people will have a nasty temperament when you just introduce yourself and tell them who you are, where you are from, and what you are doing. Others will allow you to talk for a little bit, but when you get to a personal acceptance of the Gospel, they suddenly turn cold and want you to leave immediately. I have also noticed that some people will talk about things like the weather and have a nice look upon their face. But when you turn the conversation to spiritual issues, their countenance suddenly changes. What was warm and friendly is now cold and standoffish. It is amazing how the natural man despises the truth of their sinfulness and God’s salvation.

But what is utterly amazing is the reaction of Stephen. We have seen his reaction several times through the entire process. What would naturally bring anger and resentment is instead replaced with boldness and pictures of Jesus that are marvelous to read about. Stephen’s reaction to the disputing, lies, and stoning is very similar to what the apostles did earlier in Acts 5:41 and to what Paul and Silas will do in Acts 16. How could they respond that way? How could Stephen endure the lies, the gnashing, and stoning without complaining? The answer is found several times throughout the passage—he was filled with the Holy Ghost. If we are filled with the Holy Ghost—that means that the Holy Ghost has total control of us—then we will react like Stephen.

The final thought we will consider about Stephen is The Message.

Stephen's last words are recorded in Acts 7:60. The verse says, "*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.*" Stephen's last thoughts are the same as they have been from the beginning—he is concerned about the salvation of these men. They are in the process of killing him, but he still wants to see them saved. What Stephen says is very similar to what Jesus says in Luke 23:34, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*" Even in times of difficulty, we can still have the attitude of Jesus. We can respond to trying times without complaining. But how can we do that? How can we be like Stephen?

I have just said this, but the truth is so real that it must be repeated. Stephen could respond the way he did without complaining because he was filled with the Holy Ghost. Three times Stephen is said to be full. Full of what, you ask? Twice he is said to be full of the Holy Ghost, twice he is said to be full of faith, and once he is said to be full of power. How could Stephen react as he did? How could he face all of this and not complain? He was full of faith, power, and the Holy Ghost. He had long ago given full control of his life to the Holy Ghost. If we do the same, we will react the same and not complain. Next month we will begin looking at the Life of Paul and learn from him that we should never complain.