

# The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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Volume 11, Issue 7

December 2014

Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 8)

Acts 6-7

Last month we finished with a quick look at Stephen's last statement as he detailed the application to his hearers. He said, "*Of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.*" Stephen held these members of the council (Sanhedrin) personally responsible for putting Christ upon the cross. He was absolutely right in doing so. It was their hatred for the truth that Christ preached that led them to beg Pilate to crucify Jesus. They had tried Jesus in their own court and found Him guilty of blasphemy because He said that He was God. Of course, it was not blasphemy because Jesus is God, but these religious leaders did not believe what Jesus claimed. Now a few months later, Stephen is showing that they are just like their forefathers—they have rejected the truth and killed the Messenger Who was proclaiming the truth. It was their actions and attitude that put Jesus on the cross, but they are not the only ones responsible. Stephen did not back down from telling them what they needed to hear. If the thought crossed his mind, he probably could sense that they would kill him. But there was no fear of death for Stephen. The truth needed to be preached, and Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost, could not help but preach the truth.

Just as Stephen boldly told these religious leaders that they were responsible for Christ's death, so you and I need to let all sinners know that they are responsible for Christ's death. Christ was born so that He could go to the cross as the payment for our sins. These men were physically and currently responsible, but Christ had to go to the cross. In reality, those men were no more responsible for Christ's death than you or I are. We are equally responsible. Christ died in my place. It was my sin that put Christ on the cross. Sinners today need to hear the truth boldly preached exactly as Stephen preached it.

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The person preaching and the people hearing obviously have changed, but the message has not changed. If sinners are to be reached today, it must not change. Sinners must be confronted with their sin. They must be told that they are sinners and that they are sinning every day. We cannot make the Gospel supposedly "less offensive." The Gospel by its very nature is offensive to the sinner. No one wants to be told that they are a sinner. Everyone wants to think that they are good in some way. But the Bible says that all are sinners and none are righteous. You can try to make people feel good, but you are not helping them. The only help for a sinner is to be told the Gospel—they are a sinner, but Jesus died for them, and paid the penalty for their sin. Stephen was detailed in his application. We must be detailed in applying Scripture to our hearers today.

There is one final aspect in The Application to Stephen's message. It was *Damning*. In Acts 7:53, Stephen made one final statement. He said, "*Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.*" What an awful condemnation. These leaders, and all of the Jews, had the Word of God. It was not that they did not have access to the truth, although that would not absolve them of condemnation. These were not some pagans who were just now being told about God and salvation through Jesus Christ. These were Jews. They were related by nationality to the men who had received the Old Testament. They knew the Word of God! They were told to read it, teach it to their children, and memorize portions of it. These men, and the entire nation of Israel, were given the Word of God. How did they respond to it?

Much discussion has been made by different preachers as to what Stephen meant by the "*disposition of angels.*" No one really knows what he meant. If by the word angel he meant the heavenly beings, their involvement in the giving of the law is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture. Some conjecture that angels were present on Mount Sinai when God gave the law to Moses. Other speculations are made as well. To be honest, I think it might be best to take the word angel to mean what it literally means—messenger. I do not think it refers to

the heavenly creatures. I think Stephen uses the word to imply that the writers of Scripture are not delivering their own message, but they are the messengers of God, writing down God's words. Stephen is telling his hearers that they have received the message of God from His men. Moses and all of the other writers of Scripture wrote down what God led them to write. The written Word was not the words of men, but they were, and still are, the very words of God. That made the acceptance or rejection of it even more important.

After declaring that the law (the Word of God) came from God's messengers, Stephen then stated their response to God's Word. He said, "*And have not kept it.*" No worse reaction could have been stated by Stephen. They had the very Word of God, but they did not treat it as such and did not keep it. The word kept means "to observe; to obey." These particular men, many of them Pharisees, were proud of how minutely they supposedly kept the law. They even added to the law to make sure that there was a boundary, so they would not even come close to breaking the law. In their minds, they were good men. But they had not kept the law. They had broken it in many places. Jesus had told them so in His preaching. They hated Him for daring to say anything against them. Now someone else is accusing them of not keeping the law. How dare anyone say that of them! Their anger, already at the boiling point, is about to explode like a volcano.

What Stephen said was exactly right. The Jews as a whole, and these Pharisees in particular, had not kept God's law. Jesus said to break one law is to break the whole law. The whole law condemned them. One problem with these Pharisees is that they thought the law was given to save them. They tried to obey its smallest detail. But they could not obey it because they were sinners. That is the very purpose of the law—to reveal man's sinfulness. God had given the law to show Israel their sin and had provided a covering for that sin in the sacrifices. But those sacrifices were not permanent. They had to be repeated daily and yearly. These sacrifices were only a picture and preview of what God's promised Redeemer, the Messiah, would

accomplish. God said that repeatedly in the Old Testament, but these men did not see that. When Jesus came and declared Himself to be God in flesh (a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14), they rejected Him. God had told them what was going to happen, but they rejected God's Word.

Stephen's message must still be preached today. We must declare that God has given His Word to man. God's Word is accessible today, and the message of the Bible has not changed. The Bible says that all men are sinners (Romans 3:23). As Stephen has done throughout his message, we must do today. He pointed out repeatedly that the people of his audience were sinners. People are no better today. People are born sinners and live out their lives practicing sin. They must be confronted with the reality that they are sinners. We cannot dismiss that truth by saying that they may not be able to handle it. We cannot stop preaching it because someone may be offended. They need to be offended! They must be confronted with the reality of their sin.

In this last statement, Stephen also brought out the finality of their rejection of truth. To reject the Bible is to reject all hope of salvation. Stephen's message ended abruptly, as we will see. No one knows what else he would have added, so we have to add what we think he might have said. In my mind, Stephen would have pleaded for them to realize that to reject and disobey God's Word was to reject the only hope of salvation. Stephen was not being heartless and unfeeling towards his audience. He did not hate them. He loved them with a great love. Truth is preached because one loves the people. Stephen did not want them to continue in their pattern of disobedience to God's Word. He wanted them to realize their sin, confess it to God, and trust in Christ for salvation. He was bold in telling the truth because he wanted these people to be saved. But if they continued to reject the truth, they would face eternal damnation.

Like Stephen, we must make it clear that the Bible is not just one source of truth, it is the only source of truth. Only the Bible tells

about Jesus, and only Jesus can provide salvation. If a sinner rejects the truth of the Bible, they reject the only truth that will save their soul. It is not a minor problem to reject the Bible. It is what will damn the sinner for all of eternity. To reject the Bible is to reject the Father's offer of salvation. To reject the Bible is to reject Jesus Who died in the sinner's place. To reject the Bible is to reject the regenerating power of the Holy Ghost. Rejection of the Bible is the reception of the penalty of sin—eternity in the Lake of Fire.

How did these men respond? Did they say, "You are right, Stephen. We are sinners. Thank you for telling us the truth"? I wish they would have responded in that manner. The first part of Acts 7:54 shows us The Ability of the declaration of the truth of God's Word. It says, "*When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart.*" We will deal with the remainder of the verse later, but you can see what the Word of God can do. No one can hear the Word of God and be unresponsive. We can see the power of the written Word in that it forces a response. These men heard and responded. We will continue next month.