

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

Evangelist W. Paul Redmond Sr.

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Stephen: The Man who was Faithful to the End (Part 9)

Acts 6-7

Last month we closed out with just a brief thought on The Ability of Stephen's declaration. We pick up there now. Acts 7:54 says, "*When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart.*" We will deal with the last clause of verse 54 later, but right now notice the result of Stephen's preaching. We have seen all through the message that the Word of God, rightfully preached, will bring about a reaction. God told Isaiah that His Word will not return void, but that it will accomplish what He wants it to accomplish (Isaiah 55:11). Sometimes, as in the case here, it will cause harm to the one preaching it, but that should not cause us to hold back in preaching God's truth. We do not know how people will respond. We cannot worry if they will attack us, leave during the middle of the service, or leave the church and never come back. We must preach God's truth and leave the results in the hands of God. He will do everything right anyway, so why worry about what may or may not happen. Just obey His command and preach the Word!

The clause "*cut to the heart*" means "to cut to the quick and to saw asunder." As the definition implies, this was very painful. There is a time when preaching will make one feel wonderful, but there is also a time when preaching will hurt. Telling the truth will not always cause immediate joy. Some may respond with anger, and then later respond with joy, but others may start angry and stay angry. Such is the case here. These men had responded throughout with anger. It had now reached the boiling point, and they are about to take out their anger on Stephen.

Some might say that Stephen should have tried a different approach, but they are wrong. Stephen did exactly what he should

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have done. He said the right words at the right time. Many would never say that Stephen did anything wrong because it is in the Bible, and you would have a hard time arguing that what he did and what he said was wrong. But if a preacher today preaches exactly like Stephen, then they will take offense to it. They will say that the preacher is mean or too confrontational, or that it was all right then, but we have to approach people differently today. But I dare say that we do not need to relegate Stephen's preaching to just his time period. I do not know that you can be too confrontational. Declaring the truth will be offensive. People then nor now like to be told that they are sinners, but there is no way to show them salvation until they realize that they are lost. The Gospel plainly preached will be offensive to the natural man. Some might acknowledge that we must preach the Gospel, but we do not need to confront their religion. Just try to work in the Gospel as inoffensively as possible. But that is impossible and unscriptural. All of the apostles, in their preaching in Acts, confronted the false religions whether Judaism or pagan idolatry. Sinners must be told that they must forsake their religion and trust only in Christ. We cannot do as the Catholics have done and allow people to mingle their religion and Christianity. Mixing truth and error results in error. I Thessalonians 1:9 says, "*Ye turned to God from idols.*" How did these Thessalonians know that they had to turn from their idols? Because Paul preached to them and told them that. It was not without offense and persecution, but the Thessalonians would never have been converted without the truth being declared.

What happened in Acts 7:54 is exactly what is stated in Hebrews 4:12. The verse reads, "*For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*" As a sword cuts away at the body, so the Word of God cuts away at the heart. A sword cutting the body is very painful. The Word of God cutting at the heart is painful as well. But the cutting must be done. We cannot avoid it because we do not want to offend people. We cannot stop

preaching because we think there is a better way. There is nothing else that will work! Preaching God's Word is what God ordained to convict and save sinners (I Corinthians 1:21). Stephen was not wrong, and neither are preachers today who preach in the power of the Holy Ghost. We do not need less of it; we need more!

So far in this message, we have seen that Stephen was Faithful in His Difficulty and Faithful in His Declaration. Now we arrive at the third main point. Stephen was **Faithful in His Departure**. For Stephen, all of this happened in the course of a few hours, maybe a few days, depending on how much time the events at the end of chapter 6 took. But for us, the example of Stephen can be a pattern for a lifetime. We can be faithful throughout our entire life, even to the point of death. Sadly, I have known of men who were faithful for many years, but changed their convictions, and instead of being faithful until they departed, became unfaithful. May our faith in God, and our understanding of Scripture be so real, that we must remain faithful up to and including our departure from this life.

We first notice The Roughness that Stephen experienced in his departure. The last part of verse 54 says, "*And they gnashed on him with their teeth.*" The word gnashed means "to grind or grate the teeth." Some writers believe that the men were grinding their teeth "at" Stephen, as a pack of wolves or wild dogs would do before they attack. I take the verse just as it says—"they gnashed on him." They were acting like wild animals. They had gone beyond human reasoning. The sin that Stephen preached against was bearing its results in their lives. Sin will make men act like wild animals. The rejection of the truth that Stephen preached can only bring about the full acceptance of falsehood. That acceptance of falsehood will result in the total rejection of truth and the hatred of the messenger. As others have stated so often, there are only two choices—God's truth or the devil's lie. We can phrase it another way—salvation or damnation. However it is stated, there are only two choices—one is right and one is wrong. The acceptance of the wrong choice results in actions that are awful.

In this account, you can see how far rejection of God's truth will take a man. As I mentioned at the beginning of the message, Stephen is before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. It was composed of religious men, Pharisees and Sadducees. Normally, these men were very composed and outwardly, good men. To most people, they were very moral and model citizens. They were people that many looked up to and hoped their sons would grow up and be like them. But when they were told that their good works could not save them, and that Jesus Christ was the only way of salvation, they became enraged. After being plainly told of their condition, they hated Stephen even more than they had at the beginning. Many, if not all, of these same men had condemned Christ. They hated Christ and what He preached. They had encountered the apostles and tried to stop their preaching as recorded in the previous chapters of Acts. Stephen was preaching the truth, and they could not stop him. They had to do something, and they gave in to the depths of their depravity. They became so enraged at Stephen that they lost all control of themselves. They became savages. They gnashed on him with their teeth.

Based on the language of verse 54, I believed these men began chewing on the flesh of Stephen. That is how far sin will take a person. That is what rejecting the Gospel will cause. It will turn people into wild animals. Moral, decent, respectable people do not chew at the flesh of other people. But these men were exposed for what they were in the sight of God—vile, despicable sinners who were worthy of God's judgment. They saw themselves as the keepers of God's law. God, through His preacher, told them that they had broken God's law. When confronted with their true condition, they were enraged. If possible, they would have tried to carry out their anger at God. They were truly angry with God, though they did not realize it. They could not get at God, but they could get at this man. They were so angry, they began to chew on his flesh. They bit at him and ground their teeth into his flesh. He would pay for what he said to them. They did not want to hear what he said. They had heard enough.

As we continue into verse 55, we discover the second thought about the departure of Stephen. It is The Reminder. We are told that Stephen is “*full of the Holy Ghost.*” Just in case someone would say that Stephen brought all of this on himself by his hateful attitude, the Holy Ghost led Luke to insert the statement that Stephen was full of the Holy Ghost. This is the third time that Stephen is said to be full of the Holy Ghost. In fact, the phrase is only found five times in the New Testament and three of them are said of Stephen. One time would have been sufficient, but it is said three times about Stephen. Why? We can only speculate, but I think one reason is to let us know that being filled with the Holy Ghost does not mean that you will not have opposition. False teachers say that if you are filled with the Holy Ghost then you will have health and prosperity. They are completely wrong! Stephen was filled with the Holy Ghost, and preached the truth, but he was not rewarded with health and prosperity. The people hated everything that he said, but everything he said was in the power of the Holy Ghost. The word full means “to be completely controlled.” As we have seen throughout the message, Stephen was under the complete control of the Holy Ghost. It was the Holy Ghost preaching through Stephen. There was no better way to deliver the message. It was the only way, and yet persecution came. We must be like Stephen—full of the Holy Ghost. We will continue next month.