

STEPHEN - A REVIVED MARTYR

GOLDEN TEXT

“But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:55, 56)

USEFUL PRACTICE

Through the grace of God, Christians can be faithful to Christ to the point of death, and see his glory.

SCRIPTURE READING

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-60

Acts 6

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Acts 7

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

56 “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,

58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

I – To present the life of Stephen, highlighting his personal testimony.

II – To show that the believer must remain faithful to Jesus in the face of persecution and death.

III – To raise awareness that every believer needs the power of the Holy Spirit to get stronger and remain faithful to Christ.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this lesson is the martyrdom of Stephen, a revived hero of the faith. As one of the seven men who formed the first body of deacons in the early church, Stephen was “full of faith and power”, “performed wonders and great signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). Due to his performance as

an authentic evangelist, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, he caused the envy of the opponents of the Gospel. The book of Acts reveals Stephen's martyrdom caused by his perseverance for the Gospel. In that sense, we will see that he was a faithful servant to the point of death and will receive the crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

I - STEPHEN'S TESTIMONY

1. Stephen used by God. Stephen's name appears for the first time in the choosing of the deacons in Acts (Acts 6:3, 5) In verse 8, we learn of other characteristics of Stephen: "a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8). This reputation caused envy and great opposition from the church's opponents: "Members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen" (Acts 6:9). Let us pray today for God to raise up believers like Stephen, full of faith, and wisdom.

2. A cowardly opposition. The enemies of the Church use shady, dishonest and evil means against the Christian faith. Arguing with Stephen, as they "could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke", they used bribery to persuade ungodly men to accuse him of lying. These adversaries brought false witnesses who accused him of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God. (Acts 6:9-14). These enemies also used violence against Stephen, encouraging the political and religious leadership to take him to the Sanhedrin by force. Yet, something took the ungodly accusers by surprise: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). May God use his people in such a way that they reflect the power of the Holy Spirit!

3. The fury of the accusers. After wisely summarizing the history of Israel and its apostasy, Stephen shifted the focus of his speech. He confronted the hardness of heart of the Israelite leaders, saying, "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51). In short, he denounced their betrayals and murder against Jesus. Thus, in the face of such a harsh denunciation, the wicked judges raged against him (7:54). However, faithful to his mission, Stephen expounded what the Spirit of God had put in his heart in a powerful way.

II - THE PRECIOUS DEATH OF STEPHEN

1. Full of the Holy Spirit. After the fury of Christ's enemies, the path to

Stephen's martyrdom was open. However, before doing so, the first martyr of the Church had a vision of the glory of God and saw Jesus at the Father's side, in a special moment of real spiritual ecstasy, in such a way that he did not fear death: "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55). What a glorious sight! A spiritually revived life sees the glory of God in the face of a great storm.

2. The violence of the accusers. If his accusers were furious at Stephen's courageous resistance, they could not stand hearing that he had seen the glory of God and Jesus in heaven. In order to execute him, they expelled him from the city, stoned him before a young man named Saul (Acts 7:58) and took him out of the city forcibly to make him the first martyr of the Christian Church there. At that time, Saul of Tarsus was the main persecutor of Christians.

3. Forgiveness in martyrdom. In that moment of torment and pain, Stephen did not show a feeling of revenge or hatred: "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59, 60). The Word of God that says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants," was fulfilled (Psalm 116:15). A spiritually revived believer does not harbor revenge or hatred in his heart. He is ready to forgive his tormentors.

III- REVIVAL IN SUFFERING

1. Suffering and death of the apostles. The Bible does not say how all of Jesus' apostles died. In Church History books, there are records of oral information, or historical traditions about this subject. Historical tradition, transmitted orally, and recorded in some writings, says that, with the exception of John the Evangelist, all the apostles died a violent death. The only thing that is sure is that they were faithful to the point of death and did not deny the name of the Lord. The apostles were spiritually revived. How often are we tempted to deny Christ for trivial reasons, whether in the family, or at school, or while doing our job! May God keep us from betraying the Savior!

2. Revival and suffering. Spiritual revival, motivated by the glorious presence of the Holy Spirit, renews the strength of God's servants to face difficult situations because of their faith in Jesus. The Bible shows us this enabling of the Spirit to make us resilient in the face of difficulties. For a spiritually revived believer, when faced with suffering, the joy of the Lord is his strength (Neh. 8:10). That is why revival is a matter of necessity. The

believer in Jesus needs this support from heaven to overcome the many hardships he goes through.

CONCLUSION

Before the enemies of the Gospel of Christ and death, Stephen's testimony shows us that God grants grace, strength and emotional balance to the spiritually revived believer. May the Lord help us to glorify him in the midst of life's struggles. Following the example of the first martyr of the ancient church, let us not deny Christ!