

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER TEN

THE FACE THAT WELCOMED (Acts 7) - Stephen

I. THE SETTING -- THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERING

The triumph of Stephen was the first great crisis in the history of the Church. For Israel, too, it was a crisis, for in the death of the first Christian martyr the nation's probation ceased. Even after the cry of apostasy, "**We have no king but Caesar,**" and that bitter taunt, "**He trusted in God, let him deliver him now, if he will have him,**" the Divine patience waited long. The MESSIAH had been scorned in the days of His flesh. When he was by the witness of the Spirit presented to the nation as the ascended One, who had been made both Lord and CHRIST, whom GOD had exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins, the witness of the Spirit was likewise scorned. The man who spoke to the Jewish council with "**face as it had been the face of an angel**" was hurried to death by men convicted but unrepentant. Then GOD began to display His secret purpose to bring Gentiles along with Jews into the Church. The Gospel was carried far and wide -- to Samaria, to Antioch, and to the ends of the earth, and the guilty nation was given over to the judgment that resulted in the destruction of the city and the temple in A.D. 70.

But the martyrdom of Stephen was a crisis for the Church, for the heavenly outcalling acquired a deeper fellowship with CHRIST. In the stoning of Stephen, the Church tasted of the cup of its Lord's suffering unto death, and was despised and rejected of men as He had been. The Lord JESUS suffered "**without the gate,**" in the place of reproach and dishonor; Stephen was "**cast out of the city,**" and stoned. Thus began *the long procession of witnesses* that has continued unto this day. Some of its faces are in a measure familiar to us. We know of Stephen and Paul, of Polycarp, or Perpetua and Felicitas, of Tyndale, of Ridley and Latimer, of Huss, of John and Betty Stam, and of others whose sufferings and death have been inscribed in the annals of men. But for the most part the witnesses are unknown to us. Yet every life laid down for CHRIST's sake was precious in the eyes of the Lord, and every name is written with honor in the Book of Life. By and by we shall meet these dear brethren and sisters in the family of GOD, and with them we shall extol the grace that was sufficient for all. The Lord who succored Stephen was their Lord, too. Not one of them was forsaken of Him, but His presence was with them all, where

the stones fell, or the sword descended, or the fire burned, or in the Colosseum, or amid Alpine snows, or in Siberian wastes.

We can scarcely read the account of Stephen's experience before the council without seeing afresh the Lord JESUS Himself standing before that same tribunal. The martyr was accused by false witnesses of violent words against the holy place. **"We have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us"** (Acts 6:14). The Lord was charged by lying lips, **"This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days"** (Matthew 26:61). To this charge the Lord answered nothing, even as the prophet had predicted: **"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth"** (Isaiah 53:7). But to the words of the high priest, **"I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God,"** He gave answer, **"Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven."**

In Stephen's case there was reply at considerable length to the question of the high priest, **"Are these things so?"** (Acts 7:1), for it was his task finally to arraign Israel's leaders with their crime in the murder of the MESSIAH. When their rage exceeded all restraint, he likewise bore testimony to the glory of the Son of man. To the Lord's answer the high priest gave the terrible response, **"He hath spoken blasphemy,"** and the council said, **"He is guilty of death."** The fatal decision was made; they would listen to no further word from His lips. At Stephen's proclamation concerning the Son of man, **"they stopped their ears."** Cut to the heart by his defense, they could not bear to hear that which reminded them of the solemn declaration by the Lord JESUS.

Strange it was that the council should be concerned about the reports that Stephen had said that **"this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place,"** if He were, as they claimed, still in death. The very words of the charge betrayed the uneasiness of the Jews touching the preaching by the followers of JESUS that He was alive from the dead. The chief priests knew full well the report of the guards who had fled from the tomb. They knew also that the explanation that the guards had slept was a lie. Unable to account for the empty tomb and the courage of the disciples, they silenced their doubts by renewed action against the preachers of the Gospel.

II. THE REVELATION -- THE HEAVENLY VISION

"When they heard these things, they were cut to their heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:54-56).

Then, as always when He dwells ungrieved in the believer, the HOLY SPIRIT so ministered the compensations of GOD to Stephen that he, too, was more than conqueror. The fury of earth was met by the opening of Heaven, and the loneliness of his position by vision of his Lord. To Stephen, as to Paul and to John, it was given to see the glorified Lord with mortal eyes. To all others it has been given to see Him only by faith, but such is the Spirit's delight to reveal CHRIST to His people that though they are at times in heaviness through manifold temptations,

yet they love the One whom they have not seen and, believing in Him, they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

In that hour Stephen's gaze was turned upward to Heaven and home, and was not disappointed. Since the ascension of the Lord JESUS, Heaven had been more than ever home to the people of GOD. In all ages they had desired "**a better country, that is, an heavenly,**" but now the One who had lived on earth those thirty-three years of purity and grace, had endured for their sakes the shameful Cross, and had risen again from the dead, had passed "**within the veil.**" In its love He dwelt, and He had taken their hearts with Him. His home was forever theirs. Before He died, He had assured them, "**I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.**" They looked for Him, and could be satisfied only with Him. Even if they were called to pass through death, it was only "**to be with Christ, which is far better.**"

And now *the heavens were opened*, as they had been to the Lord JESUS at His baptism at Jordan. The realms of light disclosed their approval of that which met their gaze on earth, first (for His is ever the pre-eminence) of the Beloved Son and then of the servant who confessed Him so faithfully. Only in Him and in His people can Heaven delight, but its delight is real, pure, and unashamed.

Looking stedfastly into those bright scenes, Stephen saw the glory of GOD. He had commenced his defense before the council by reminding his hearers that the GOD of glory had appeared to their father Abraham. This was the true meaning of their history, and it was this that made them a separate people on earth. The gods of the nations were vanity; the GOD of Abraham was the GOD of glory. Whenever the children of Abraham had been true to their calling and their heritage, they had rejoiced in His majesty. None of them knew Him better than did Moses. He had seen His glory in the burning bush, in the deliverance from Egypt, and upon Sinai, but still his prayer rose up: "**I beseech thee, show me thy glory**" (Exodus 33:18). David spoke of the GOD of glory (Psalm 29:3) and looked to the day when the everlasting doors should be lifted up that the King of glory might enter in (Psalm 24:7). Moses had come down from the mount with rays of that glory lingering on his face, and even Stephen's judges saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. Gazing into the source of the light that lit his face, Stephen saw the glory that Abraham had seen and, moreover, *in the heart of its radiance* at the right hand of GOD he saw "**Jesus standing.**"

Ere the Lord had gone to the throne, He had spoken His sure word of promise, "**Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world**" (Matthew 28:20). "Alway," i.e., "though all the days" -- what could more clearly set forth the perpetual presence? But Stephen was given even more than the token of the presence. He learned its climax, that the One who companied with His saints and with him would bring their path to its triumphant goal with a vision of His face and a welcome to His side. Upon the martyr the vision was bestowed before his eyes closed on scenes here, that he might tell us what waits the gaze of all who die in faith. Surely *that face of light* was bent down upon him and poured its love upon him, for it was to the Lord JESUS that he addressed his dying words and, confident in Him, he fell asleep.

"**Jesus standing.**" That is not to be read as contradiction of the statement that "**He . . . sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high**" (Hebrews 1:3). Both positions picture profound truths, and both give aspects of His ascension life which exist concurrently. In relation to His

finished work on earth and to the exercise of His sovereignty, He is viewed as seated. In relation to His unfinished work in Heaven, that gracious ministry which He undertakes for us now, He is viewed as standing. He remained "**this same Jesus.**" The glory of the throne had not changed His heart toward His own. As He had ever been to them -- tender, compassionate, understanding, and true, so He was still. As in love He had toiled for them on earth, so in Heaven would He minister to their need in the same love.

With his eyes fixed on JESUS, Stephen bore testimony to that which he saw and named his Lord by that title which CHRIST's own lips had so often used. "**I see the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.**" The reference was obviously Messianic, for, as we have noted, it was in accord with the Lord's own words, "**the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power.**" It testified that the despised JESUS was actually the Son of Man of Daniel's vision, who would come with the clouds of Heaven (Daniel 7:13), that He had reached the height of absolute power, and that nought could hinder the fulfillment of his prediction to the council. Stephen's own need was fully met in that he saw JESUS at GOD's right hand, even as today by faith "**we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honour.**" The doom of the leaders of Israel, the guiltiest of the guilty, was sealed in that the martyr saw the Son of Man in that place of power.

III. THE BLESSING -- CHRIST'S FRUIT IN HIS MEMBERS

"**Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul**" (Acts 7:57-58). Their fury knew no bounds. Driven on by their hatred of the name of JESUS and by the knowledge that they were impotent to mar His glory or frustrate His will, they undertook summary judgment on His confessor. With frenzied cry and utter refusal to hear another word, they laid violent hands on Stephen and cast him out to his death. Denying him even the pretense of justice and of trial, they cut off his life with the cruel stones. It was the death which was decreed by the law of Moses for the blasphemer, it was meted out to one of the *noblest of the long line of faith*. According to the law, as given in Deuteronomy 17:7, the witnesses were required to be foremost in the execution of the death penalty. They had brought the evidence; they must be first to cast the stones. Not content with falsehood, Stephen's accusers added to their infamy by sustaining their witness in the place of stoning. In those solemn moments wherein they strained their lives with innocent blood, they left their garments in the care of a young man called Saul. It is the first time that we hear of this man, who figures so much on the page of Scripture, but whose story is forever woven with that of Stephen.

"**And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 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. And Saul was consenting unto his death**" (Acts 7:59-8:1). In this passage the word "*God*" is in italics. There is no object stated for the very "**calling upon,**" and the reference is most naturally to the following words. As Paul showed in his greeting to Corinth -- "**with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours**" (I Corinthians 1:2). -- calling upon the name of the Lord JESUS was the mark of the New Testament Christian. His name was honored, as the name of Jehovah in the Old Testament was honored. "**Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord [Jehovah] shall be saved**" (Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13; Joel 2:32). The conviction of the early church was

unmistakable, and attested by Stephen, that in the naming of the Lord JESUS they owned Him as Jehovah. That Pharisees, such as Saul, brought up in the strictest monotheism, should come to adore a once-crucified man as being eternally in the Godhead is evidence that to them His credentials of deity were beyond dispute.

Stephen's words recall those spoken last by the Lord upon the Cross. In unshaken trust, the Lord had commended His spirit to the Father; so did the martyr commit his spirit to the Lord. This again was witness to the deity of JESUS. Then kneeling, Stephen "**cried with a loud voice.**" (This expression, in which the energy of the speaker is gathered up, is used of the Lord JESUS in Matthew 27:50.) The Lord had prayed for those that crucified Him: "**Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do**" (Luke 23:34). Imbued with the same spirit of forgiveness that revealed how truly he was in the mind of CHRIST, Stephen likewise prayed for his murderers. How precious must this have been to the Lord JESUS, and what *fruitage for Him* in the life of His saint! Thus with eyes and heart alike occupied with his Lord, Stephen "**fell asleep.**" It was not death, but victory. The Lord JESUS had said, "**Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death**" (John 8:51), and so it was with the martyr. So it is with all who trust Him.

In his vision of the Lord JESUS CHRIST, in the fragrance of his character, and in his suffering for His sake, Stephen became *the pattern believer* of this age. His name (Stephan, i.e., crown [stephanos], or garland of victory) pointed to the heavenly destiny held out to all his brethren, including to the measure of their devotion to Him, the crown of glory and honor. Stephen's interpreter was the man whose conversion was the firstfruits of the divine response to his dying prayer. What was concentrated in the last moments of the one was spread out in the years of experience of the other, so that the latter wrote, "**Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body**"; and again, "**So then death worketh in us, but life in you**"; and again, "**We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal**" (II Corinthians 4:10, 12, 18).

What shall meet our gaze as we thus look to the things "**not seen?**" First, and supremely, we shall behold the glory of our Lord, His unfading triumphs, His exaltation in manhood at GOD's right hand, His infinite depths of holiness and of love, and the unutterable wonder of His blessed face. We shall see our Father's home, with its many mansions -- all forever open to the children of His love; we shall see the "**far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**" wrought for us by the "**light affliction**" of this present time. Again, we shall behold "**the inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.**" Then there is the reward which hands once pierced by cruel nails shall bestow upon lonely toilers from the harvest fields of earth. Moreover, we shall feast our gaze upon the joy of unclouded fellowship with CHRIST and with the redeemed of the ages. Then there is the occupation of the blest, the holy service wherewith "**his servants shall serve him.**"

To see the face which Stephen saw is to be enabled to live a heavenly life amid earthly care. It is ours with him and with Paul to behold "**the glory of God in the face of Christ,**" and soon the joy of faith shall be swallowed up in the joy of seeing Him as He is.

Present with Thee, oh, Lord JESUS,
Some day this rapture I'll know;
Sweeter than aught of earth's visions,
Passing all bliss here below.

Present with Thee, in Thy glory,
Days of my pilgrimage past;
Down at Thy feet I shall worship,
Prostrate before Thee at last.

Present with Thee, my REDEEMER,
Because my load Thou didst bear;
I shall adoring behold Thee
Glory ineffable wear.

Present with Thee, in Thy likeness,
Clothed in Thy fitness, not mine;
Gladly Thy loveliness telling,
Owning Thy glory divine.

Present with Thee -- not a shadow
Casting its gloom o'er my heart --
Calmly I'll dwell in love's sunshine,
Nor from Thee ever shall part.

Present with Thee, my BELOVED,
This Thy desire toward me,
Even that ever and ever
I should be present with Thee.

--H. C. H.--

~ end of chapter 10 ~